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Contentious Spaces: Caste, Commemorations and Production of Political Community in South India

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and is my own work. It has not been submitted in whole or in part, in any previous application for any other degree or professional qualification. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Karthikeyan Damodaran
March 20 2018

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Abstract

In their struggle for equality in Tamil Nadu, Dalits (ex-untouchables) often challenge prevailing caste norms by appropriating practices and conventions of locally dominant groups. This study examines how the Dalit Pallars of Tamil Nadu engage in various forms of socio-cultural and political assertions to challenge their marginality. It looks at the performative aspects of such struggles by focusing on *Guru Pujas*; public performances undertaken to pay homage to late social and political icons/leaders. As annual events these pujas have enabled Thevars, the local dominant caste, to showcase their community's strength and power through the appropriation of public space. However, the same mode of public performance, which was integral to the public production and consolidation of the dominant caste as a political community, has been replicated by historically marginalised castes. This is reflected tangibly through visual aesthetics during commemorations. Following the Thevars and Nadars, a section of the Pallars are engaged in proclaiming the historical past by asserting that they too form the royal lineage and are competing with Thevar iconography to challenge the cultural dominance of Thevars. As quotidian forms of oppression and violence mark the spatial relationship between these castes, these performances provide a micro-lens to understand the dynamics of how local power is generated and made visible through a politics inscribed in space. Recent decades have witnessed increased competition over public symbols and the strategic location of caste-specific cultural signifiers – including competition over style and performance – and a heightened contest over the occupation of public space. Thus, the study maps the Pallar assertion and the challenges posed by Thevar retaliation.

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Glossary

Abhishekham: ablutions in which priests pour various liquid, fluid and semi-fluid substances such as milk, honey, fruits mixed with jaggery on a deity.

Agamudaiyar: One of the three major castes that form the Mukkulathor/Thevar cluster.

Alangaram: Adornment of the deity

Arathi: A practice in which substances are waved around in circular motion in front of a deity or ritual subject.

Arunthathiyars: The third largest Dalit caste in Tamil Nadu who are engaged largely as farm hands, conservancy workers and leather workers. Concentrated more in the Central districts.

Bandh: a form of strike or shutdown as protest

Bhakthi: Devotion

Cheri: A contested term, which indicates settlement but historically attributed to the dwellings of “untouchable” castes, which are located outside the proper village for the cause of pollution.

Darshan, Darisanam: Sight, Vision

Guru Puja: Leader Worship

Jothi: Torch

Kadu: Forest, wilderness, uncivilised.

Kallar: Caste of southern Tamil Nadu, traditionally recruited as watchmen, they are also referred to as involved in dacoity, and were warriors and chieftains, now largely cultivators. In Pudukottai district they have a royal heritage.

Kaval: Guard, police, and watch duty.

Kuladeivam: Lineage gods associated with a person and often goes beyond generations and they have specific rituals for the deities.

Maanam: Honour or dignity, a social idiom that forms an integral part of Tamil political and cultural discourse.

Mandapam: Hall

Maravar: A caste of warriors, headmen and chieftains.

Marudham: Wetlands, one of the five landscapes within the classical Tamil literary convention.

Melam: A kind of drum used for weddings and other temple festivals, there is a hierarchy in drums and drumming.

Mirasdar: Holder of Mirasi rights or a local landlord.

Mulaippari: Sprouts of nine grains grown on clay pots as part of religious rituals.

Mukkulathor: The group of three castes specifically referring to the Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyars.

Nadar: Caste traditionally associated with toddy tapping, now one of the most economically powerful mercantile castes which demanded Kshatriya status.

Nattar: Local headman mostly of a village or a set of villages called as Nadu.

Padaiyal: Ancestral offerings

Pallam: Pit

Pallar: The second most numerous Dalit caste who are now calling themselves as Devendra Kula Vellalars and Mallars. Chiefly concentrated in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

Paraiyar: The most numerical Dalit caste in Tamil speaking regions but concentrated more in the Northern Districts.

Pandhal: A temporary structure built using coconut frond walls or palm leaves to erected bamboo or casaurina poles.

Prasadam: Transvalued substance, the leftovers after worship.

Puja: Worship

Sangam: Association or academy.

Sethupathi: The title of line of Maravar kings who were part of the Ramnad Estates.

Silambam: Stick based martial fight

Thevar: Title, which means godly or divine in nature, used by Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar castes. Also the caste cluster of these three castes who carry a strong self-perception as erstwhile rulers of Tamil land.

Tuppu Coolie: Financial reward

Valaiyar: Caste group of lowly origins abundantly found in Tiruchi and Pudukkottai regions and are classified under Most Backward Class category.

Vanniars: One of the most numerous castes of Tamil Nadu's northern region.

Veeram: Valour or bravery is one among the twin social idioms along with Maanam that form an integral part of Tamil cultural and political discourse.

Urani: Small tank or pond used for irrigation purposes.

Uravinmurai: Community Council.

Zamindar: Landlord.

Acronyms

AIADMK: All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the breakaway party from DMK, founded by matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran in 1972 after his ouster.

AIFB (also FB): All India Forward Bloc is a political party founded by nationalist leader Subash Chandra Bose in 1939. Muthuramalinga Thevar headed its Tamil Nadu unit; following his death in 1963 it broke into numerous factions.

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party is a national party founded in 1980, it was originally founded as Bharatiya Jan Sangh in 1951 and is driven by Hindu majoritarian right wing ideology. The party has grown phenomenally over the years and is currently ruling India.

CTA: Criminal Tribes Act consists of various pieces of legislation put forth by the British Colonial Government against certain sections of the Indian community marking them as “habitual criminals” and policed them keeping under various forms of surveillance.

DK: Dravidar Kazhagam (Federation for the Dravidians) is a social organisation founded by Periyar E.V.Ramasamy in 1944; it served as the fountainhead of various Dravidian organisations and political offshoots and formed the foundation for the predominant political discourse in Tamil Nadu.

DMK: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, (Federation for the progress of Dravidians), a party founded by C.N. Annadurai in 1949.

DPI: Dalit Panthers of India or Dalit Panthers Iyakkam (Movement) Tamil Nadu was formed in Madurai in 1982 by A.Malaichamy after almost a decade of its founding in Maharashtra. (Also see VCK).

MBC: Most Backward Classes, a category carved out of marginalised castes among the OBCs as an effort to ameliorate their conditions and provide better representation for governmental benefits.

MDMK: Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Renaissance Federation for the Progress of Dravidians) is a party founded by Vai Gopalsamy (Vaiko) in 1994 after his ouster from DMK.

OBC: Other Backward Classes; an official category for people belonging to lower castes who are educationally and economically backward but are not suffering from stigma.

PMK: Pattali Makkal Katchi, (Toiling People's Party) a largely Vanniar based political party founded by Dr.S.Ramados in 1989 which grew from Vanniar Sangam.

PT: Puthiya Tamilagam, (New Tamil Nadu), a party founded by Dr.Krishnasamy in 1998 from the Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation is a predominantly Pallar based party.

SC: Scheduled Castes are a category of people who were historically marginalised and were formerly referred to as untouchables and are scheduled in a list for receiving benefits of positive discrimination.

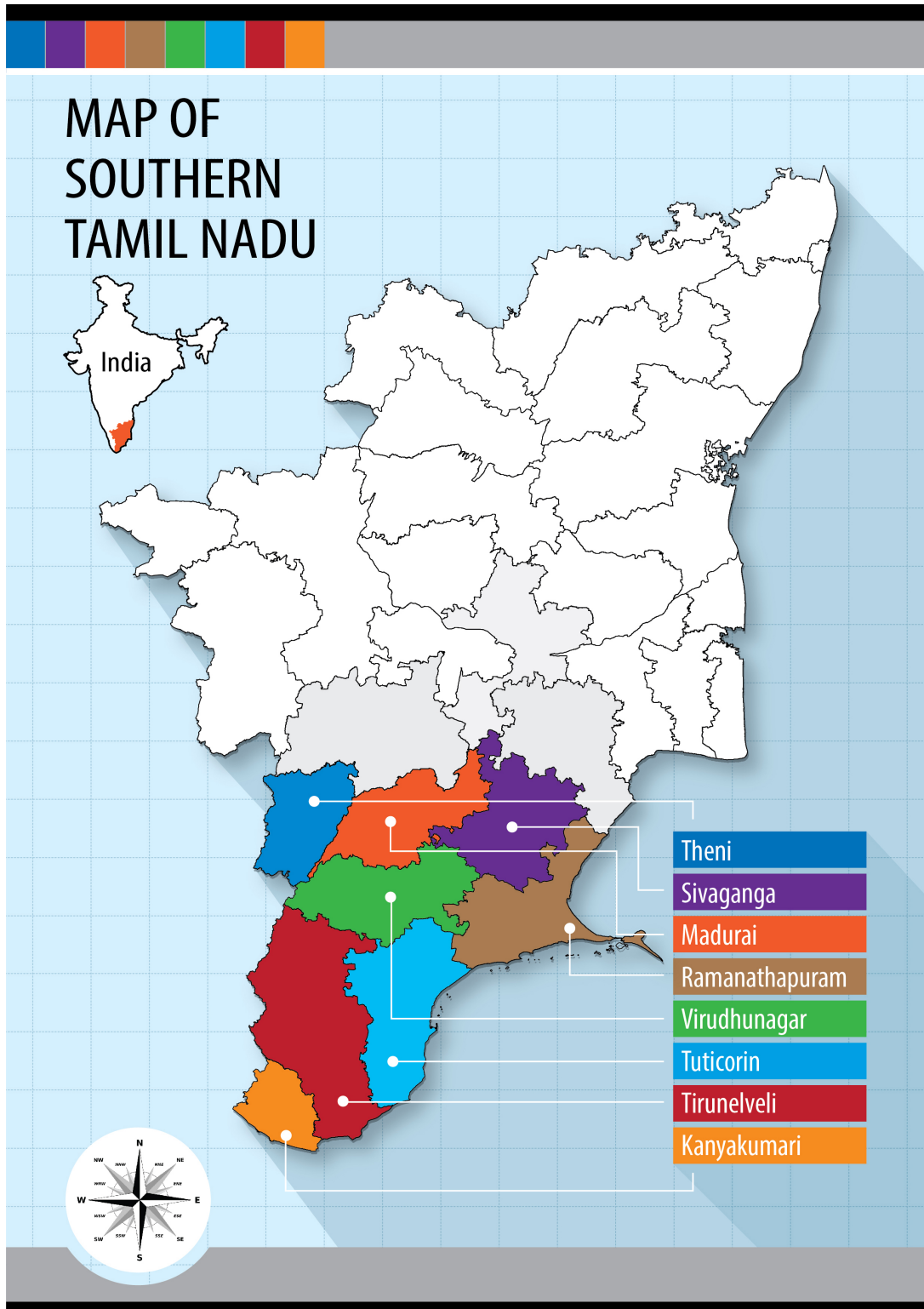
SCALM: Scheduled Castes Liberation Movement, a group of disgruntled Dalit leaders from Paraiyar, Pallar and Arunthahthiyar castes who felt that they were sidelined by major parties came together in 1988, and formed the forum to address Dalit issues while propagating Dalit unity.

TIP: Thiagi Immanuel Peravai (Martyr Immanuel Forum), founded by P.Chandrabose is a regional level association that works for annihilation of caste and Tamil liberation and is confined within Ramanathapuram district.

TMMK: Tamilaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (Federation for the Progress of Tamil People) is a political party founded by militant Pallar leader John Pandian.

TTS: Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary is an ecumenical centre based in Madurai, South India.

VCK: Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panthers Party), the largest Dalit political party, which had its origins in the form of Tamil Nadu's unit of Dalit Panthers of India founded by A.Malaichamy in 1982. After its present president Thirumavalavan assumed leadership they entered electoral politics and changed the party name as Viduthalai Chiruthaigal partly influenced by Tamil nationalism.



Map 1- Map of Southern Tamil Nadu. Illustration: R.Rajesh.

INTRODUCTION

The Thevars are speaking with sickles; they wish to maintain that they belong to the martial castes by indulging in these murders and attacks. Unity is our weapon; the moment we are divided we become victims of murders. Keep your bodies fit, and healthy to counter-attack. We should protect ourselves, we should protect our villages, and we should protect our school children. Can we build separate schools, because they harass and attack us? Can we build separate hotels because they are not letting us in? Can we lay separate roads because they are not allowing us to use the roads? We have to fight back and ensure our rights are protected or else we have to remain as slaves. (Dr. Krishnasamy, Tirunelveli, November 2014)

This quote captures the dynamics between the upwardly mobile Dalit (ex-Untouchable) caste of Pallars and the dominant land-owning Thevars in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. The speech was delivered at a meeting to discuss how to counter the series of Pallar murders committed by Thevars in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts.¹ Both castes are present more or less in equal numbers in the southern districts and they carry a history of antagonism, which makes the situation highly sensitive. Any skirmish can snowball into violence, as has been the case since the 1930s. In his speech, Pallar-leader Krishnasamy highlighted how demographic changes have led to shifts in the social structure. He asked Pallar villagers in caste sensitive zones to avoid social interaction with Thevars. He pointed out how in the mid-1990s, in places like Ottapidaram in Tuticorin and Virudhunagar district, the Pallars opted not to work as farm hands in the fields of Thevars. He, therefore, called on other areas to take a similar stand. Krishnasamy asked them to remain independent of the Thevars and seek jobs in towns instead.

¹ For details of the caste conflicts here see: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/tns-caste-fields/>

² Jallikattu is a bullfighting event traditionally practiced among the martial castes in and around Madurai and Sivaganga regions. It has a highly mythicised origin and is widely propagated as the symbol of valiant Tamil culture especially through films. See Karthikeyan (2013a; 2013b).

³ A 'caste cluster' is a coming together of analogous castes, which carry a certain commonality among them to exercise social and political influence and gain political benefits. Karve (1958: 403) initially used the term caste cluster 'to represent castes that have a similar occupational category. The widely known

Why are the Thevars ‘speaking with sickles’ and engaging in violence? Unlike the other members of the Scheduled Castes (the official term for Dalits) in the south of Tamil Nadu, the Pallars, as I will illustrate in my thesis, carry a history of resisting caste-based dominance. They are currently engaged in various symbolic demonstrations of resistance, and utilise economic changes to remake the social. This is not done in isolation and they largely replicate their immediate oppressors - the politically most dominant caste in the region - the Thevars. The Pallars are not only checking Thevar dominance but also becoming their equals, inviting their wrath (Pandian, 2000; Karthikeyan, 2016). Struggles over power define the conflict between the castes. The Thevars wish to retain their traditional authority and dominance, accrued through the hierarchical caste structure, and maintain it through violence. The subaltern castes do not remain submissive in the face of this and retaliate in order to negate such forms of dominance. The social dynamics animating the two castes exemplify what Mosse (2012) has termed ‘competitive associationalism’, where members of both castes are engaged in openly expressing their caste affinity and pride. This is epitomized during the commemoration of iconic caste leaders, which have become very popular occasions. As pointed out by Hannah Arendt, ‘Power always stands in need of numbers.... Power is never the property of an individual ... Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert’ (Arendt, 1970: 52). The commemorative events allow the formal gathering of large numbers of people and the operation of collective memory, thus becoming occasions to showcase power which, as I show, habituates violence.

My thesis examines commemorative events held for caste icons and analyses how caste power is produced through them. At the heart of my study lie the competing masculinities that inform southern Tamil Nadu’s socio-politics. This ‘Martial Symbolism’ is tied to the concepts of *maanam* (honour) and *veeram* (valour), which define Tamil ways of living. The notions of *veeram* and *maanam* were espoused in early twentieth century Tamil politics (Irschick, 1969; Rajadurai and Geetha, 1996; Pandian, 2000; Ramasamy, 1997; Bate, 2009) and are directly linked to the production of caste power. They hark back to the legacy of ancient Tamil rulers who were exemplars of honour, bravery and munificence. Tamil literature is replete with stories of the Cheras,

Cholas and Pandyan kings who ruled the Tamil land and their given characteristics have been encapsulated brilliantly in popular culture, especially in Tamil cinema and through *Jallikattu*². Within the Tamil context, certain castes have been associated with these character traits. The Thevars in particular, through various forums and access to cultural capital, have naturalised this martial symbolism. Past orientalist accounts have classified them as the martial castes of the Tamil region (Thurston, 1909). This ‘naturalised association’ with martiality, along with a heightened sense of caste pride as ancient rulers of the Tamil land, informs the everyday behaviour of the Thevars.

This sense of masculine dominance and caste pride has not gone unchallenged. There is a long history of Dalit mobilization in Tamil Nadu, but it was following the rise of the Dalit Panthers of India in the early 1980s and militant Pallar leaders like John Pandian and Pasupathi Pandian, that a form of street politics defined Tamil Dalit masculinity. The notion of facing the oppressor eye-to-eye and retaliating was made possible. Radical and popular Dalit leaders in the 1990s like Krishnasamy (above) condoned retaliation. The Dalit Panthers coined slogans like *Adanga Maru*, *Athu Meeru*, *Thimiri Ezhu*, *Thiruppi Adi* (Refuse to submit, break the Shackles, rise up and hit back), and paved the way for a Tamil Dalit political discourse that redefined Dalit masculinity and idealised valour and resistance.

The competing Thevar and Pallar masculinities, thus, both rest upon martial prowess and inform the dynamics of caste politics (Karthikeyan, 2013). This has resulted in a situation where almost all the castes apart from Brahmins, who have negligible numbers, are engaged in the politics of ‘Martial Symbolism’ built around caste ‘heroes’ often ‘discovered’ from the past. Caste affinities are also attached to various ancient Tamil kings and each caste makes a competitive claim over them. Medieval chieftains, irrespective of their affiliations, are provided with caste colours, hailed as heroes and brought to life through the visual signifiers that occupy public space during commemorative events. The respective castes place them in strategic locations,

² Jallikattu is a bullfighting event traditionally practiced among the martial castes in and around Madurai and Sivaganga regions. It has a highly mythicised origin and is widely propagated as the symbol of valiant Tamil culture especially through films. See Karthikeyan (2013a; 2013b).

showcasing not only their tradition but also their control over public space. In my study, I discuss such contentious spaces and competitive associationalism, providing a genealogy of the relevant symbolism. In most of the southern districts and places like Thanjavur district in the delta region, visually dense markers are a crucial part of competitive martial symbolism.

One of the major themes of my thesis is the iconisation of caste heroes and how that mutually shapes, affirms and facilitates the production of caste and political power. Through participant observation and ethnography, I explain the process of iconisation from a Thevar and Pallar perspective. These icons become signifiers of collective identity and central zones around which the community's potential for assertion is produced. Each caste cluster³ in Tamil Nadu fights for recognition, visibility and legitimisation. In both cases there are attempts to deify their respective icons through the erection of statues, and visual media is deployed to take the icon to the masses. I attended almost all the major events of the Thevars in order to understand these processes where 'martial symbolism' forms the key element. Sacrifices made while fighting the British is a common theme in the celebration of medieval heroes and also modern day heroes in connection with the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA)⁴. As I illustrate, these annual commemorative events are the building blocks of the collective. Caste consciousness among the Pallars was also facilitated through the domain of letters, where textual materials in the form of magazines were founded to impart self-consciousness. The group engagement with a distinct identity under the name of Devendra Kula Vellalars (a title that seeks to move away from an untouchable past) was further mediated during the commemoration of Immanuel Sekaran (Immanuel hereafter) in various visual and aural communicative cultural practices.

³ A 'caste cluster' is a coming together of analogous castes, which carry a certain commonality among them to exercise social and political influence and gain political benefits. Karve (1958: 403) initially used the term caste cluster 'to represent castes that have a similar occupational category. The widely known caste clusters are the Yadhavs (See Hutton, 1963: 45) in the North and Vanniars and Thevars in the South (Barnett, 1976: 61). For a detailed discussion of caste-cluster consciousness, see Carroll (1978).

⁴ The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) came into being in 1871 and was first imposed in North India. Further amendments were made in 1911 and it was implemented across various regions in British India. In 1924 and 1944, the Colonial government gradually toned down the provisions of the Act. For further reading see Arnold (1979), Bates (1995), Radhakrishna (2002), Pandian (2005).

In my study, the competition between the Thevars and Pallars is exemplified through the *Guru Pujas* (Leader Worship) for key caste leaders, Muthuramalinga Thevar and Immanuel. Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent Forward Bloc party leader from the Thevar caste, and a Member of Parliament. As an oppositional force to communists and congressmen of his time, he politically mobilised the Thevars. Immanuel was a Pallar Dalit leader who fought against caste discrimination and dominance and was murdered in 1957. Thevar was arrested in the Immanuel murder case but was later acquitted. In Thevar *Guru Puja* (GP hereafter), caste commemorations define control and dominance, while the latter is all about visibility, claims to space and recognition. The contentious spaces of these performances indicate the spatial dynamics of caste and how it informs everyday life. The expressions of competitive associationalism that are present in these events not only translate into self-glorification of the respective castes, but provide space for competitive forms of denigration and expressions of masculinity, which habituate violence. Both the GPs are now seen as hypersensitive events, inducing all arms of the government machinery to formulate adequate plans to ensure a peaceful event. My observations of, and conversations with, the people of the southern districts as part of multi-sited ethnographical research and archival material that I collected, has enabled me to understand that the longstanding antagonism between the Thevars and Pallars is principally due to economic transition, changes in the agrarian relations and the concentration of political power. Shifts in the economy have resulted in the scales of power tipping between these two castes, and since the 1930s caste clashes have become common, as I will explain in detail in chapter 3. Over the years, government benefits and migration have had a significant effect on the Pallars. The resultant higher levels of oppression have led to some historical changes, with a proper mass mobilisation occurring in politics. For the first time among the Pallars in the southern districts a prominent political party working for a broader Dalit, oppressed caste and Muslim alliance came into being in the form of *Puthiya Tamilagam*⁵, which has checked Thevar

⁵ Originally founded as All India Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation by the surgeon, K. Krishnasamy in 1995, the Federation aligned with the Janata Party in the 1996 Assembly election, contested the election and won. In 1998, the Federation transitioned into a political party, *Puthiya Tamilagam*, and was registered with the Election Commission of India. See Wyatt (2010).

dominance at various levels.

A Note on Terminology

Whilst I have spoken of Pallars and Thevars above, castes do not automatically form a clustered identity. As illustrated in later chapters, these identities are constructed and have to be reproduced, and fissures are emerging within both the Thevar and Pallar collectives. The Pallars, for example, are identified as part of the Dalit collective but some are trying to renounce that identity in favour of a more independent one that is largely informed by ‘martial symbolism’ and royal ancestry. By claiming blue blood lineage, a section of the Pallars are engaged in the complete disassociation of themselves from other Dalits with whom they spatially share a lot. Other Pallar groups, for example TIP’s Chandrabose and his party cadres, however, reject such moves and run a magazine called *Maatram* (Change), which seeks to ally with like-minded Dalit parties and work towards the annihilation of caste. Therefore, they do not approve of the exclusion of the Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars – the two other major Dalit castes who are lower down the hierarchy than the Pallars.

Despite being aware of their various efforts to reclassify themselves, I still refer to this caste group as Pallars because of the historical relevance and the need to keep in mind both the existing situation and rural histories. The leader of the largest and most organised political group among the Pallars, Dr. Krishnasamy, may fight to rename the Pallars as DKVs, but he still uses the term Dalit. Even in a television interview while answering a specific question on the usage of ‘Dalit’, he stated that it is a term denoting the oppressed across the nation and even the globe, terming black people as Dalits. Pallars in urban centres who are affiliated with political parties are quite conscious about how they are being identified; they do not wish to be seen as victims at the mercy of dominant castes. A strong sense of pride as members of a caste group that was historically engaged in agriculture and included rulers is emergent.

These efforts do not necessarily gain them upward mobility, as there were numerous

occasions during my fieldwork where instances of violence denied them equal status, such as contestations over their participation in temple rituals. Villages like Pallapacheri in Ramanathapuram, and areas in and around Usilampatti, including Kuruvithurai⁶, are still under the grip of caste discrimination and untouchability. Despite their upward mobility, the Pallars are not free from what some of them see as the stigma of Dalit status. The treatment meted out to them by others and especially the Thevars in everyday life and special occasions - the denial of their participation in the Kandadevi⁷ festival for example - indicates their fractured position. They live in what I refer to as a Janus-faced existence, where they traverse between being Dalit and not.

For ease of reference I use the different nomenclatures based on the context, but maintain a consistency in using the term Pallar. In the case of the Thevars, since they are more organised and identified as a caste cluster in everyday communication, in the media and political networks, I use the term Thevar more commonly. However, I return to specific caste names - Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar - in relation to historic contexts. I do not carry any intention to associate one more than the other with their respective caste clusters; all my references are based on what I heard and saw during my fieldwork.

Caste in Tamil Society

Ludden notes how production systems determine the models of caste dominance (Ludden, 1985). Most places where these two castes are at conflict are basically dry-zones, for example the whole of Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga district where the

⁶ The local Thevars attacked the Pallars of Kuruvithurai village for celebrating Pongal. The former, due to a self-imposed ban on Jallikattu, had abstained from celebrating Pongal as a mark of protest but the Pallars violated the dictum (*The Hindu*, 19 January 2016).

⁷ Kandadevi is a village in Sivaganga district, and the Swarnamoorthi Eswarar temple car festival has been the centre of controversy for over two decades. Dalits in the district have fought in vain for their right to participate in the temple festival and pull the ropes of the car. After struggles by Dalit and Leftist movements and legal interventions during 2005 and 2006, a handful of Dalits were allowed to participate by the administration. Since then there has been no car pulling festival. See Karthikeyan (2012b) and Scott, (2016).

Pallars and Thevars traditionally feud is a dry zone, where the model of caste dominance is royal and martial rather than priestly or Brahmanical (as found in the wet-zone river valley villages, including Tirunelveli). Here, 'Untouchable status is expressed more in idioms of feudal service than those of ritual impurity' (Mosse, 1999: 66).

Politics in Tamil Nadu is largely caste-driven and though the importance of caste is waning, it is still a primary mode of mobilisation. The Pallars still face the stigma of untouchability in various places; which undermines their efforts to seek a better socioeconomic status. Driven by stronger pulls of ethnicisation, they place their caste identity in terms of Tamilness to seek equal status to the Thevars, pointing to their glorious past associated with agrarian civility (Pandian, 2007). Pallar efforts to secure higher social status include mytho-histories explaining their subjugation. One recent claim is that they were wrongly added to the list of Depressed Classes by the British and were stigmatised as untouchables because of a larger conspiracy involving the Thevars and Telugu speaking Naickers. Mosse (1999: 64) notes the complexities involved in reframing social identities, arguing that 'the acquisition and use of new and emancipatory social and political identities is often constrained by local relations of power.' As hierarchy defines social relations in the Indian context, the 'more universally valid social and political identities stand in contrast to caste identities'. This then makes social interaction bound and contained by such hierarchies. This thesis partly examines how members of the lower caste groups try to acquire a new political identity by investing in symbolic resources. Thus it maps the efforts towards the politics of identity change.

Despite the strong foundations of anti-caste movements and anti-Brahmin mobilisation Tamil Nadu, which is largely seen as a state of social justice, has been mired in caste based discrimination and violence and caste still informs everyday practices in the social and political domain (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011). The caste hierarchy in Tamil Nadu does into conform to the 4 *varna* categories. According to Beteille (1991:15), 'The population of Tamil Nadu can be broadly divided into three groups, the Brahmins, the Non-Brahmins, and the Harijans (or Adi-Dravidas)'. Harriss (2017) informs us that the

Tamil country generally lacked *jatis* that claimed either Kshatriya or Vaishya status (although some have done so in the more recent past), so that all non-Brahmin castes, other than the outcastes, were classified as Shudras. Perhaps as a consequence, claims to such status are frequent. For a long time the Thevars in the south claimed royal status and were rulers of estates in the Eastern Ramnad and Pudukottai regions. Both the Vanniars and Nadars during the early decades of twentieth century were engaged in bitter fights to claim Kshatriya status. Though geographically located in different places, they contested those claims (Venkatachalapathy, 2010).

Post-Independence Tamil politics has been dominated by two regional-nationalist parties, ostensibly committed to social justice. The *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Federation for the Progress of Dravidians) and *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (All India Anna Federation for the Progress of Dravidians) parties have been in power interchangeably from 1967. Though they checked the political dominance of the Brahmins, they replaced them with intermediate castes. The traditionally landed castes like the Mudaliars, Reddys and Kammas are more or less losing their traditional authority and feudal power. Due to the machinations of electoral politics where numbers matter, however, the clustered identities of Thevars and Vanniars have accrued great power practicing caste majoritarianist politics. Again these castes are not free from challenges; since the mid-1990s the Paraiyars in northern districts and Pallars in the south have checked their hegemony, leading to some of the most violent clashes and murders in the respective regions (Pandian, 2000). Quoting Marguerite Ross Barnett, (1976: 83) John Harriss (2017: 70) captures this uneasy terrain of Tamil politics, where the rise of backward castes has generated antagonism with the untouchable castes:

Mass mobilization of the backward castes during the 1940s transformed the character of the Madras Presidency political arena and determined the essential constraints on radical politics. *The orientation of the backward castes was toward maintaining their position in the face of competition from Untouchables and other backward groups.* This status was not threatened by the wealthy landlord and the proud and orthodox Brahmin, but by the previously subservient Untouchable...’ (emphasis by Harriss).

The association of Dravidian politics with the interests of backward caste or intermediate caste groups is a common trope in Dalit scholarship. The rise of

Krishnasamy on the Tamil political landscape, which was dominated by Dravidian politics, was a historical watershed for subaltern politics. His emergence along with Thirumavalavan of the Dalit Panthers of India in the post-1990 Ambedkar centenary era is significant on two counts. Not only did they lead the independent mass mobilisation of Dalits in the state, they also articulated the possibility of challenging the status quo of Dravidian political parties. A strong counter-hegemonic Dalit discourse was established for the first time in post-colonial Tamil politics. Krishnasamy, during his stint as MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) from 1996-2001, demanded a white paper on the government's reservation policies, the naming of districts and transport corporations after Dalit icons, and spearheaded a highly successful campaign to abolish the double-tumbler system (where Dalits were served in separate receptacles to maintain the purity of other castes) prevalent in the state. More than anything else, he gave a militant edge to Dalit politics and checked the violence perpetrated by the Thevars against Pallars by speaking and practicing a language of retaliation.

What Gap does the Research Aim to Fill?

No major ethnographic study has specifically discussed the historical antagonism between these two castes and the complex nature of socio-economic relations and everyday life that is informed by caste. Although Mosse (1994; 1996; 2012) and Deliege (1992, 1996, 1999) discuss the nature of social relations and lower caste assertion in the Ramanathapuram region, they do not deal with the contentious nature of social relations and caste interactions, which are central to my study. The thesis title, 'Contentious Spaces' refers not only to the underlying aspects of a terrain marked by lived experiences of contention but how such spaces are produced as part of social relations that are mired in questions of dominance and control, resistance and retaliation. An event, which helped the Thevars with the production of enormous political power and to express their dominance in the social and spatial terms, was replicated with a similar event by the marginalised castes to remake the social. This study provides an ethnographic account of how intercaste relations between two of the most populous

caste groups in the southern districts remain contested in the political, cultural and civil spheres.

The Pallars are in the midst of a great transition as sections of the community are using different strategies of political representation to advocate their demand for recategorisation as members of a respectable dominant caste. Some Pallars are ready to give up Government benefits for Scheduled Castes in this process. This project also contributes a different perspective towards understanding the nature of caste dynamics in India. While existing scholarship has examined the integration of particular caste groups and has mapped their upward mobility, the contestations that crop up in the process have not been given much attention. Good (1999) looked at the contestations between the Shanars (now Nadars) and Maravars during the colonial period and De Neve and Carswell (2011) have studied how upward mobility in terms of rising levels of education and availability of industrial jobs and schemes like National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has altered the power relations among Gounders and Arunthathiyars in the Western region. There has not, though, been a full-fledged ethnographical study addressing this phenomenon. This study, therefore, examines caste contestations by analysing the rituals and performances that are enacted as part of such processes that help in the production of caste. On a whole, this thesis demonstrates that replicatory mechanisms used by members of subordinate groups need not necessarily mean that they accept the hierarchical structures. Instead, it is a form of dissent, asserting that they are equals.

Key Arguments and Chapter Contents

Public performances offer a micro-lens to understand assertion and the production of political power and articulation of identities. My research project examines the changing nature of political mobilisation among the competing caste groups of Thevars and Pallars in Tamil Nadu. The study charts the transition of extremely localised village events into mass events in the southern districts and how they become avenues in the production of caste and political community. My research is focused on Thevar *Jayanthi* (Birthday) and Immanuel GP as sites

of public contestation and looks into the socio-political history, rituals, performances and transformations that have led to the historicisation of these mass events. The project focused on the following key questions:

- How is meaning constructed, negotiated and contested in the contemporary political landscape, especially within public ritual performances?
- What role do these annual ritual ceremonies play in the production of caste and political community?
- How is Thevar dominance reproduced through such performances?
- How is the Dalit challenge played out within public space and how do Dalits articulate their replication of dominant caste events?

Chapter 1 locates the study in relation to existing research and literature on caste mobilisation, public performance and space. Chapter 2 sets out the methodology of my research. The pre-colonial and colonial conditions and administrative context that allowed the Thevars to accumulate political power and social position, and how the Pallars and other Dalits in the region negotiate and contest servitude, forms the contents of the first substantive chapter; Chapter 3. I first demonstrate the Thevars' control over common resources (especially irrigation) and how that combines with their ritualistic power as patrons of temples in the region, providing them with the power to dominate. I then introduce a series of contestations that form everyday life in the region. The chapter also reveals how Thevar dominance extends into the social realm and is ingrained in various forms.

Chapter 4 centres on the most important political figure from the Thevar community in modern times, Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar. It captures the iconisation of Thevar, who has emerged to be the most powerful non-Dravidian leader in Tamil politics, especially in his posthumous avatar. The chapter describes how Muthuramalinga Thevar's GP and iconisation was well-planned by a group of people from the Thevar community who wanted it to become an all-important political event. Chapter 5 builds on this and offers a detailed ethnographic account of the processes involved in the

commemoration. Right from negotiations with the district administration to how the community prepares for the event is explained. The commemorative event has a mythicising function, validating the myths already developed and the complex personality of Muthuramalinga Thevar. The event both in its structural form and performative nature traverses between sacral and political elements. The rituals enhance the complexity attached to the icon.

Chapter 6 tracks the iconisation of Pallar leader Immanuel Sekaran. I observe how the politicisation and iconisation of Immanuel radically altered and shaped the future of Pallar politics in the southern region of Tamil Nadu, leading to heightened forms of contentious politics. The iconisation of a radical figure does not happen in isolation and given the prevailing socio-political and cultural history of the region it led to a form of deification. On the one hand, this made him a prominent counter-symbol to Muthuramalinga Thevar, but on the other it slowly de-radicalised the anti-caste icon and reduced him to a caste icon upon which Devendra masculinity is scripted. Chapter 7 looks into the minutiae of the Immanuel Sekaran GP, highlighting all the rituals and reading the language of images in the occupation of public space. It also looks into the changing nature of the event and how it increasingly orientates towards the production of caste.

Both the GPs have become occasions for the respective communities to showcase their masculinity. Chapter 8 looks at how both communities are engaged in competitive associationalism and how this results in the habituation of violence both in episodic and everyday forms. Among the two communities, the victims of state and inter-caste violence are hailed and perceived as martyrs and again commemoration follows such incidences of violence. The Pallars had every reason to believe that they were victims of repressive apparatuses, including those of the dominant castes, the AIADMK government in power, and the ruthless police machinery, which has a history of repression, as we will see.

Chapter 9 looks at the vulnerabilities of collective identity. Clustered as Thevar, the

endogamous castes of Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars are not a naturalised collective. I will show how fissures are developing in the form of indignation from the Agamudaiyars, who feel that despite being part of a Thevar collective that has provided the latter with an edge in contemporary politics, they have been internally sidelined. Similarly, Pallars are not a homogeneous group. Some seek to identify across caste as Dalits, whilst others adopt a more narrow identity and lay claim to a kingly past. Finally, conclusion discusses the thesis and considers the wider implications of the case studies discussed here.

CHAPTER ONE:

Caste, Space and Performance

Overview of Caste

Whilst class and caste often overlap, the two are distinct forms of stratification. With class, positions are acquired at birth according to parentage but may be altered later by achievement. With caste, however, one's station is fixed for life regardless of achievement (Kingsley, 1942: 321; cited in Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 1994: 16). Despite the absence of phenotypical differences between castes, the assumption is that Hindus have specific coded substances in them. In fact these coded mechanisms are incommensurable and cannot be compromised. According to Dumont, caste hierarchy is based on two extreme positions standing firmly in opposition to each other. At one extreme is the Brahmin (the purest), and at the other stands the untouchable (the polluting). A series of castes fall in between and are ranked on the purity/pollution principle (Dumont, 1980: 197). Caste rules, thus, are designed to prevent intermingling, and social relations were finely calibrated to make sure that people's inherent and inalienable substances were not compromised by being in close physical proximity with members of different castes (Gupta, 2004).

In caste-based stratification there are not just elaborate, ritualised rules that ordain how distinctions should be maintained, but also sanctions in place should the norms be violated. It is this obsessive attention to the slightest variation in ritual ranking that marks caste apart (Gupta, 2004). For Gupta, the concepts of hierarchy and difference are central to understanding caste as a form of stratification. He says, 'Difference is salient when social stratification is understood in a "qualitative" sense' (1992: 8). On the other hand, hierarchy becomes a defining feature when the system is based on a form of differentiation that can be quantified. Dumont provided the theoretical underpinning to the notions of purity/pollution by insisting that a pure hierarchy is a state of mind, to which all those in the caste system willingly concede. Dumont explained that as all

castes are included within this all-encompassing hierarchy, each caste ideologically participates in upholding the system as a whole (Dumont, 1980: 33-40).

According to Gupta (2005: 411), however, 'empirical evidence, informs that caste identities cannot be straitjacketed within an unrelenting hierarchical grid where the status of the pure and the impure are empirically and unproblematically firm in their interactional nexus' (also see Gupta 2000: 54–85). For example Brahmin purity and untouchable pollution need not be the yardstick, as in many cases when local groups try to raise their status, the aristocratic and military values of Kshatriyas are emulated (Srinivas, 1972). This relates to theories, which place monarchy at the centre of localised caste systems. Quigley (1994: 25), for example, says, 'Caste results from an uneasy stalemate between the pull of the localised lineage organisation and the forces of political, ritual and economic centralization encapsulated in monarchical institutions'. Following Hocart (1950), he argues that the central institution of caste is the monarchy and not Brahmin priesthood, as caste systems result from a certain degree of centralisation and involve the organisation of ritual and other services around the king and dominant caste lineages.

The caste order is characterised by contested notions of hierarchy and status and that is why competitive assertions of caste identity emerge. These assertions can take symbolic forms, including claims to origins in a golden past. These are specific to each caste and often contradict the Brahmanical hierarchy. This indicates that status concerns are not always linked to purity and pollution. If castes are seen as discrete entities then competition among different castes may be inherent to the caste order (Gupta, 2000: 55–82). This implies that the caste system is influenced not by ideology but by power dynamics. Contrary to Dumont's understanding, power is manifest across the entire caste order. It becomes vital to understand the underlying tensions between different castes claiming superiority and also contesting notions of inferiority. Brahmin hegemony was challenged in an organised way during the early 20th century both in Madras Presidency and Bombay; strong, non-Brahmin assertion emerged. In the post-colonial era, the 1960s and 70s saw peasant castes assert their identity. Previously

ranked as low castes, these groups received a fillip with the extension of affirmative action and the centenary celebrations of Ambedkar – the foremost Dalit leader - in 1990, which saw a wave of Dalit assertion across the nation. The idea of caste as a consensual system, thus, is challenged here.

According to Natrajan (2012:18), Fuller's argument that, 'Castes are still being historically constructed, or perhaps more aptly being deconstructed as a vertically integrated hierarchy decays into a horizontally disconnected ethnic array,' marks the ethnicisation of caste. Castes, in this approach, are seen as having the freedom now to operate as a horizontal set of discrete entities. He also cites the arguments of Gupta (2000; 2004) and Rudolph (1967) respectively, as variants of the ethnicisation of caste thesis. The former's argument concerns the end of the 'relational' and hierarchical caste system and the emergence of substantialised castes without a caste system, and the latter's revolves around the 'modernisation and democratisation of caste into paracommunities of caste.' Originally conceptualised by Dumont (1966: 281), the 'substantialisation of castes' refers to the process by which the traditional interdependence of castes was being replaced by 'a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essential, identical and in competition in one another'. Here, castes function as groups primarily to represent their interests to the state under the rubric of ethnic interests. This explains the proliferation of caste associations during the colonial era as competing entities vying for resources.

The ethnicisation, or substantialisation, of caste, heralded by many social scientists as the death of the old caste system (based, as they thought it was, on interdependency rather than conflict), has provided new mechanisms for the strengthening of caste identity. Caste may no longer convey a sense of community that confers civilizational identity to the Indian subcontinent, but it is still the primary form of local identity and, in certain contexts, from Dalits to Brahmans, translates the local into recognisably subcontinental idioms of association far more powerful than any other single category of community. Natrajan is critical of the perception of caste as an ethnicity and foresees a danger that this will increase the durability of caste, and render caste disputes

‘normalized as cultural or ethnic-identitarian conflicts’ (2012: 4). This encourages the practice of managing diversity in terms of legal equality rather than as a problem of inequality and discrimination. He goes further and prioritises the cultural element, conceptualising the *culturalisation of caste* as ‘the process of caste groups to (re) construct and (re) present themselves as cultural groups such that caste comes to be viewed, narrated, embodied and performed by social actors as simply pre-existing “natural” cultural difference or identity rather than as socioculturally constructed relations of ascribed status and antagonism’ (Natrajan, 2012: 5).

Caste and Politics

In the post-colonial context, the traditional upper castes, including Brahmins and large landowning castes like Rajputs, were associated with the Congress Party and continued to wield political power in most parts of India. These traditional elites responded to representative government and popular politics in their own interests. However, the 1960s saw the emergence of peasant castes on the political scene. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987: 52) characterised the newly ascendant peasant castes as ‘bullock capitalists’ who challenged the hegemony of the Brahmins and traditional Kshatriya (Royal or warrior) castes. Such processes of questioning established hierarchies through various means pre-dates colonial rule. With the arrival of the British, however, the emergence of various caste associations in the early 20th century seeking to alter their status in census collections was an indicator of lower castes’ rejection of their position.

Caste and politics in India have always been related, but the relationship has manifested differently over time. Following the establishment of democracy, constitutional foundations introduced one major change in the way caste and politics interact - all castes were made legally equal. Change in agrarian class relations, coupled with the provisions in the Constitution, allowed for the proliferation of caste associations all over the country (Kolenda, 1978: 121). Democratic politics has brought about aggressive caste assertion, but this has not resulted in contesting the category of caste as such. It has been frequently pointed out that caste politics will not end caste, but uses it as an

instrument for social change (Weiner, 2002). Beteille (1996: 167) succinctly notes that, 'outside the domain of the family, caste is most active at the level of politics in contemporary Indian society'. Caste identities have evolved. Therefore, no matter which caste is in question, its involvement in politics has been to stake a claim to jobs, educational opportunities and positions of power in government bodies, all in direct competition against other castes. This has resulted in different forms of anti-caste mobilisation and violent conflicts (see Pandian, 2000; Gorringer, 2005). Castes which were historically affected and never felt comfortable promoting themselves due to fear of reprisal, now boldly demanding representation. Jaffrelot (2002: 10), thus, argues that, 'Paradoxically caste, - certainly the politicized version of caste – was responsible for the democratization of Indian democracy.'

The Caste Question in Tamil Nadu

The Non-Brahmin movement, which was formed in 1916, expounded anti-caste rhetoric, yet functioned as little more than a movement (renamed as the Justice Party) to advance the interests of the non-Brahmin elite (Pandian, 1994). During a seminar on Tamil nationalism that I attended in 2012, a young lad in his teens spoke about the predominance of non-Tamils in the state, before reflecting on social relations between members of different ethno-linguistic groups: 'When two Malayalees meet there is a possibility of a tea stall coming up, when two Marwaris meet there is a possibility to strike a business deal. It's rare that two Tamils meet in Tamil Nadu, but when surprisingly it does happen, there may be a chance for a caste clash.' The young boy's facetious speech illustrates how divisive caste is in Tamil Nadu. The non-Brahmin movement failed to address the fragmentations within the category, which included Dalits who despite being within the fold were never able to assimilate due to caste based oppression. This indicates the shortcomings of Dravidian politics, which, though conceived in terms of social justice, never sought the annihilation of caste (see Subramanian, 1999).

The offshoots of Dravidian politics, like *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Federation for the Progress of Dravidians), concentrated on the language question rather than caste.

This then leads us back to the boy's speech and the larger question of why caste differences, which were successfully subordinated to the language question, have reasserted themselves. Is it because of the emergence of Dalit movements?⁸ What does this tell us about the success of the Dravidian movement and the relevance of Periyar⁹ to the situation of Dalits and their oppression? Seal observes that, 'In much of south India, the gulfs between Brahmins and the rest of the community were so wide, and the natural antipathies so bitter, that society here was divided at least as effectively by caste as elsewhere it was divided by religion' (1971: 112). The *Dravidar Kazhagam* espoused radical atheism and anti-Brahminism, but during Periyar's time and under Dravidian politics there was a transfer of power to dominant intermediate castes, including the Thevars in the South and Vanniyars in the north.¹⁰ These intermediate castes emerged as strong forces both in terms of political and economic power. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tamil Nadu witnessed a series of caste clashes in the southern districts between the Thevars and Dalits, who had become upwardly mobile thanks to government benefits and migration to the Middle East. This mobility of Dalits resulted in more physical forms of violence against them, as the caste Hindus' ideological hegemony over them was slipping and their dominance had to be affirmed through coercion (Kannan, 2002). The celebration of competing GPs marks the heightened forms of contest between these two castes and thus requires research to map how meanings of caste are constructed and contested through these political performances.

Theoretical Framework

Given my focus on caste performance and contestation in space, this thesis engages with three interlinked bodies of literature. Here, the first part explores the concept of space;

⁸ The history of Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu actually precedes the Dravidian movement, and the non-Brahmin movement's genesis can be found in Dalit struggles. See Geetha and Rajadurai (1998).

⁹ E.V. Ramasamy, founder of the Self-Respect movement and Dravidian Federation in Madras Presidency was fondly referred to as Periyar, which means 'the revered'. He was an iconoclast and espoused non-Brahminism as an ideology to counter Brahmin domination.

¹⁰ According to MSS Pandian (2000) the intermediate castes of Vanniyars and Thevars were never part of the non-Brahmin collective as they had parties like the TamilNad Toilers, the Commonweal party and Forward Bloc. This assumption, given their huge population, is a shortcoming as statistics show that both DMK and AIADMK members from these two castes wield much power.

the second looks at political performance; and the third part explore the literature on processions and their connection to public space and violence. Finally, I link all these theoretical concepts and place them within the specific context of my research.

a) Space and Place

The concepts of space, place and mobilisation (to show dissent or resistance) have become central in terms of understanding social movements. Space and place are not merely seen as providing a physical background for mobilisations, but as mutually constitutive of social movement agency (Martin and Miller, 1993). Perspectives on space explain the possible connections and relations between everyday life experiences and socio-political and economic processes. This helps us understand the constitution of space and its context in terms of how it influences and shapes collective action. Space, according to Lefebvre, is produced through social relations and structures. It is an integral part of all social life, both affecting and affected by social action (Lefebvre, 1991: 14-16, 280-283).

Lefebvre identifies space in three ways: perceived, conceived and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991: 33). Perceived space refers to the relatively objective, concrete space people encounter in their everyday lives; it is 'real' space, which can be measured or described. For example, it is like entering a city square where you can physically measure dimensions, comprehend the materials and buildings, and observe the roles of individuals within that space, their language and the activities they perform. Conceived space or 'representations of space' refer to constructions of space conceived in the mind, i.e. the socially constructed discourses, signs and meanings of space, which are tied to their production and the 'order' that those relations impose. Lefebvre (1991: 38) defined the 'representations of space' as abstractions inherited through the ideologies and epistemologies of 'scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers'.

‘Lived’ or ‘representational’ spaces arise from the interaction between perceived and conceived space. It is a representational space which is ‘directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre, 1991: 39). ‘This is the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space, which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.’(39) Therefore in relative terms, social relations and lived space unite together in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991: 39; Martin and Miller, 2003). In other words, lived spaces are spaces that characterise quotidian lives and histories. Lefebvre sees these lived spaces as oppositional to dominant modes of representation and production of spaces. Castells (1977) contests this account arguing that the city was plainly a product of abstractly conceived illustrations of categorical social formation, rather than a contestation-driven mediation between everyday life and the social order. Harvey, likewise, has reservations about Lefebvre’s open-ended, three-way notion of the production of space. Harvey (1989: 263) sees a privileging of the production of material (perceived) over ideological-institutional (conceived) and lived-symbolic (experienced) space. All, though, agree on the socially constructed nature of space.

Applying such theories, Mitchell (1995: 128) notes how,

Public space often though not always, originates as a representation of space, as for example, a courthouse square, monumental plaza, public park or pedestrian shopping district. But when the public uses these spaces, they also become representational spaces, appropriated in use. Public space is thus socially produced through its utility aspects as public space. If public spaces arise out of dialectic between representations of space and representational spaces, between the ordered and the appropriated, then they are also very importantly spaces of representation.

This notion of a dialectical relationship in terms of spatial meaning is important as it highlights subjectivity and human experiences. These form the ‘representational’ and connect it with the public, thus giving meaning to forms of representation. The discussion on everyday practices of life makes Lefebvre’s work useful to understand the complexities of marginalisation in public spaces. The struggle to gain command and

control over social space, he argues, has become a central element of everyday life, and this has created a situation where the spatial aspects of everyday power relations have become more tangible and therefore result in more frequent incidents of socio-political contestation (Lefebvre, 1991: 416).

b) Performance, Performativity and an Overview of Parades and Processions

Visual spectacles and public performances to highlight a political agenda or the presence of a community or group are common forms of contestation. Processions, marches and parades are public performances where the community displays their loyalties or attachments. These could be religious, ideological, national or cultural in nature. The question here is whether these performances act as markers of a categorical state or as conditions that help in the formation of new categories? This section starts with a definition of performance and its various theoretical aspects, and considers parades and processions as performances.

Schechner (1993: 5-22) writes that the most critical part of performance is the transformation of the subject. He notes the 'startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become what they ordinarily are not.' For him, performances are multi-stage human actions or events. Each stage is characterised by momentary changes for an audience, so the performance is 'framed, presented, highlighted or displayed' in a heightened fashion. Schechner's definition of performance has a conditioned reality; it relies on the performers being aware of their roles. Like Schechner (1988), I see performance as ritualised, theatrical and staged action. Since I am looking at an event as a political performance, the emphasis is on various dimensions. I focus on the spectacle but also on the 'transformation of the subject': I examine the sources and the styling of the self: how the performers act in public, and what vocabulary and signifiers they use to communicate messages.

I am thus interested in the cultural aspects of performance. Here it is imperative to note that performance need not be reduced to a dominant cultural idiom. Subcultures, or local

performances do have a meaning of their own and become part of the genre though they may remain contested terrain. Identities do not presuppose continuous culture or traditions.

‘Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols and language ... If culture is not an object to be described. Neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal and emergent,’(Clifford, 1986: 19).

Culture as explained by Clifford here is a sphere of contestations. The consolidation of cultural or sub-cultural affiliations forms part of the performance and the performative aspect throws up questions of embodiment, the nature of social relations, ideological underpinnings and emotional and political effects (Diamond, 2003: 5). Though performance is a mode of communication between the performer and the audience, there is a strong political element here too. Some studies focus on socio-political contexts (Kaur, 2003), others on the dramatic content (Schechner, 1988, 1993), and others on political issues and activism. The political in performances does not stand in isolation; the relationship between the performance and the map of political context and political action is crucial. There is a whole body of literature (referred to later in the thesis) that looks at these performances as modes of political communication. In analysing political performances, I draw upon Butler (1993: 2), who distinguishes between performance and performativity: ‘performance presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject’ (1993: 33). She adds that, ‘Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms ... this repetition is not performed *by* a subject: this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject’ (Butler, 1993: 95). According to Hansen (2004: 23), ‘Political Performativity could be defined as a body comprising acts that characterize the construction of images, spectacles, forms of speech, dress and public behaviour that endorses the identity of an organisation, party or movement, defines its members and promotes its cause or worldview.’ Davis argues that ‘parades and public ceremonies have been neglected by scholars, despite a few of whom have systematically investigated the relationship between social life and public

enactments' (1986: 3). My work will take up the invitation to study both public performances and their performative effects in a caste context.

C). Parades and Processions as Political Communication

Marches, processions and parades are forms of political communication, which have attendant spatial meanings. These performances in public spaces can also be read as expressions of power relations (Davis, 1986; Marston, 2002). Processions include expressions of state or elite power (Nazi Germany and Soviet Union), as well as efforts to convey a dissident message. For example, processions can be enacted by those excluded from larger public spaces on economic, social, or cultural grounds. 'Pride' marches across the globe are one example (Goheen, 1993). Defining the social meaning of parades and processions, Davis (1995: 297) says,

Parades have been recognised as important representations of 'communities' and conflict over the meaning and image of a single parade may seem inconsequential in the grander scheme of neighborhood and social movement politics, but for some neighborhoods and identity-based social movements, the creation of 'communities' has been integral to their histories, and parades have served as a method of self-expression and as well as a method of representation of the self to society as a whole.

Parades, as public performances, provide an opportunity to display markers of identity. Marginalised groups are, thus, able to display and act out their existence and sensibilities for others. In the South Asian context, processions form part of everyday life and have a historical context in relation to the freedom struggle when marches became a popular form of expression and dissent. More recently, religious processions like *Vinayaka Chathurthi* (Celebrations of Lord Ganesh) and the Muslim *Muharram* procession have been precursors to riots. Other processions include wedding, funeral and political processions. Since my focus is on how a marginalised community uses public performances to showcase assertion and perform newer meanings of identity, it is significant to look at the fine distinctions of such performances. Parades and processions whether political or religious attach a performative spatial component to cultural identities. The routes that these processions take are often in themselves symbolic acts to invade spaces which were hitherto unavailable to them. Processions can be seen here as

constructive of particular spaces and identities. During such performances, bodies in motion ‘perform the streets’, since the space that they are in belongs to those marching. Public performances have been important to dramatise all sorts of group concerns and issues related to religious and political convictions. They, therefore, offer insights into the nature of the social system or cultural edifices and enhance our understanding of the meanings of political and religious behaviour.

Urban historian Gooptu (2001) explores the emergence of Militant Hinduism and Islam during the 1920s in Uttar Pradesh. Her study examines fragmentations within the large categorical formations of Hindu and Muslim and touches upon how caste boundaries and questions of marginalisation invoke contestation. Likewise, Freitag’s (1989) study looks at the coming together of popular and elite cultures that shaped religion-based political identities in the 1920s and 1930s. She proposes that visual signifiers in public processions enhanced the formation of Hindu identity and argues that shared rituals in a public space helped forge common identities based on religion (Freitag, 1989). In terms of my own project - the study of GPs - it becomes critical to examine the process of solidification in terms of a larger identity on the one hand and the countervailing ruptures that challenge those processes on the other. This reminds us that Dalit or Thevar assertion via the GP does not happen in isolation. It entails the coming together of different subcastes and the implications remain crucial to our understanding of the larger picture.

Gooptu’s work explores the assimilation of Shudras¹¹ into the Hindu fold and reveals that the process is marked by conscious efforts on the part of Shudras to contest their marginality. These efforts have larger ramifications as they slip into intense visual modes of communication and a process of othering. Processions play a critical role in these events. The popular politics of Shudra Hindus took the language of martiality into public space. The Shudra poor invested in physical powers and masculinity to counter dominant classes within Hinduism, carving out a space for themselves and claiming to

¹¹ Shudras are ‘service providers’ belonging to the fourth category of the Varna division of the Hindu hierarchy, which includes Brahmins (Priestly), Kshatriyas (Royal) and Vaishyas (Trading).

be the real protectors of Hinduism. The everyday features of the Shudra poor's political action turned out to be protecting the bazaars from Muslim and untouchable assertions. During this time they emerged as strong and able guardians of the economy and culture of Hindu bazaars. Religion as a comprehensive category within the competitive urban context meant self-preservation, self-defence and self-assertion and the culture of processions provided a means to all three (Gooptu, 2001: 210).

Processions within festivals provide an opportunity for assertion and the public display of power. Intense visual signifiers and masculine performances dominate the spatial practices during festivals. As Gooptu (2001) notes, the promotion of masculinity and martial traditions can become a processes of othering. This understanding holds good for my own analysis, and helps my exploration into the intricacies of the construction of martial traditions. Celebration of masculinity forms a critical part of caste and religion and may lead to physical violence or even major riots. As Hindu Shudras became more grandiose, their processions became more visual, there were displays of weapons and an antagonistic fervour towards Muslims started to spread. Significantly, such processions were newly invented for festivals, which previously had no such tradition (Gooptu, 2001; Jaffrelot, 1998). These festivals have meant different things for different social groups and they have become important terrains of contest over rival forms of self-expression for the upper caste leaders and the Shudra poor.

Processions are one means by which a community delimits its territory. Freitag argues that religious processions define the sacred space of the community. This attribute becomes conducive for violence in certain contexts, since when one group's space is overlapped with another's then those circumstances can prompt riots (Freitag, 1989: 134-135). The control and protection of sacred spaces has historically been an important pivot around which religious conflicts are organised. This holds true today and it is not only sacred spaces that have significant symbolic values and remain potential causes for communal conflicts (see Freitag, 1989; Pandey, 1990; Das, 1990; Jaffrelot, 1998; Gooptu, 2001). Going further, Van Der Veer says that 'riots and rituals both appear to play a significant role in the construction of social identities' (1996: 154-176). He

suggests that rituals and riots derive their meaning from the way they relate identities to public space: ‘The ritual nature of riots and the riotous nature of rituals are thus connected through discursive traditions on the nature of “self” and “other”’ (1996: 155). Public space here not only patterns ideas of community, but is itself constructed through ritual and rioting.

My argument here is that rituals are double binding in nature; as a process they integrate individuals into a community of participants, but they set that group apart from non-participants. There is often a tendency to portray ‘the other’ as ‘threatening’ and ‘impure’. Such conceptualisations can imply the necessity for a ritual action to subjugate or conquer the alien presence. Through these rituals, a sort of legitimacy is given to the appropriation of public spaces. Through modes of deification on one hand and boundary marking on the other, rituals may lead to a situation where any desecration, desacralisation and invasion of spaces sparks violence. These processions highlight the contested nature of spatial zones and can provide the spur to lay claim to a larger territory. The contestations over these spaces are two-fold in nature: for the dominant sections it is a question of maintaining ‘spaces of privilege’ and for the weak it is a struggle to attain equal access to these spaces.

Rituals and the Role of the State

When a political group gains power, its symbols join the symbolic structure of the state and become legitimised within the domain of state patronage while the conflicting group is left to seek such patronage. The role of the state is also crucial to understanding the functional aspects of the parades. In the Irish context, historically the state has facilitated and encouraged Protestant Orange parades while restricting the Green nationalist parades (Bryan, 2000: 60-96). This makes it a classic case of comparison in terms of the role of the state and its machinery colliding with vestiges of power and dominant players. The crux of my research is an analysis of Dalit and Thevar forms of mobilisation experienced through the GP anniversaries where questions of state patronage and restrictions come into play. In the Irish context, where parades have

emerged as the means through which collective identity and strength of the community is displayed, they have become sources of major conflict, local tension and recurrent violence, posing a persistent problem for the authorities concerned. The symbolic power of parades is such that both communities have taken a hard line on the issue and the decisions are influenced by the capacity to mobilise the biggest crowd and thus the greater threat of violence and disorder (Bryan, 2000: 173-181; Jarman, 2007: 92-105).

A common thread running through this section is the embodiment of social positions within ritual. Drawing upon the above discussed theoretical concepts we now turn our attention to the South Indian context, to understand the production of space through embodied practices, where the existence of caste becomes the decisive factor in the mobility of bodies. Dalit bodies operate within spatial coding generated by caste-based practices, which produce and maintain abstract, exclusionary public spaces. These spatial practices are not constrained to the physical but transcend every aspect of life and play a role in constituting the identity of Dalits. In the following pages we will look at the spatial aspects in terms of our understanding of caste, but we begin with the literature on segregated spaces.

Segregated Spaces

In *Urban Outcasts*, Wacquant (2008: 1) says,

Ghetto in the United States, banlieue in France, Quartieri Periferici (or Degradati) in Italy, problemområde in Sweden, favela in Brazil and villa miseria in Argentina: the societies of North America, Western Europe and Latin America, all have at their disposal in their topographic lexicon a special term for designating those stigmatised neighbourhoods situated at the very bottom of the hierarchical system of places.

He goes on to explain that though these categorical formations are drawn from the urban context based on the 'historical matrix of class, state and space within a specific epoch', spatial formations are built on social hierarchies. Therefore, stigmatised neighbourhoods develop from marginalisation related to class and race.

In the South Asian context, the representational/lived spaces are carefully designated according to social hierarchies. The most prominent among those is the spatial demarcation on the basis of caste. The historical separation of *oor* (the village proper) and *cheri* (untouchable space) is common in Tamil society. Such separation was practiced across India and different terms were used for those habitations based on regional languages. *Cheris* are seen as stigmatised neighbourhoods where the untouchable (impure) people dwell. These lived spaces, or representational spaces as termed by Lefebvre, give us an idea of how social relations determine social space. The hierarchical nature of social relationships in Hindu society, thus, has profound spatial meanings. The demarcation is not only social but also economic, in that untouchables, as agricultural labourers, are made to live in low-lying areas (Ramaiah, 2007: 1-13). Caste-based restrictions on interaction affect the mobility of Dalits who are denied access to certain public spaces and social control over their mobility rests with dominant castes. The complexities of social relationships within the caste context in the rural setting are highlighted in numerous village studies (for example see Gough, 1969; Beteille, 1969; Moffatt, 1979). Though there are clearly demarcated spaces that operate within the rural/village setting, the importance of space in terms of understanding social relations within an urban context is pertinent. One of the most prominent themes in the study of urban spaces in South Asia is the role of public spaces in local politics, in which the neighbourhood as a site of everyday class, gender and caste relations takes a central place (De Neve & Donner, 2006: 12).

Unlike the rural set up, the tangibility of caste in everyday urban life is complex. Though there are distinct caste estates or ghettos, space does not operate in same terms as in villages. An examination of the lives of Dalits reveals that they rarely escape the oppressive impact of spatial planning, irrespective of rural or urban, public or private contexts. Space is pivotal to the ongoing process of subordination and the social exclusion of Dalits (Loynd, 2009). In terms of individual experience, members of lower castes often have to masquerade their identity when living in common neighbourhoods or posh localities, aping the practices of upper castes to escape identification. As Gorringer (2010) points out,

For the Dalits, the notion of space formed the central social idiom of their struggle. Dalits in urban areas continue to live predominantly in slums or particular enclaves. Urban space in this sense is still marked by caste; people seeking homes for rent are often asked about their caste or are asked to get references from upper caste people before being offered a place.

This project probes the lived experiences within these spaces and the production of space.

The Contested Nature of Public Space

Though caste based social relations determine spatial ordering, space, as an idiom of identity becomes the premise on which marginality is contested. It is important, therefore, to look at space and its role in reconfiguring social relations, reproducing/contesting inequalities and as a realm where notions of dominance and subjection are both played out and disputed. To extend our understanding of how exclusion takes place in a public space, let us look at Kaviraj's (1997) exploration of contestations around a park in Calcutta. He analysed how different conceptions of the 'public' are mapped on to the uses of common space in a highly stratified culture. He says that the idea of universal access to public spaces eluded Indian social and cultural life, wherein one's social attributes determined one's level of access to hierarchical spaces. He explains the universal and the appropriate, where the former is the western notion of public where universality of access irrespective of social attributes is maintained and the latter is the Hindu social universe, which is premised on a traditional logic of strict non-universalism based on segregation. Kaviraj's explanation of the appropriate explains how the social ordering translates into the spatial and determines public access.

However, what happens when a caste alters its social status, as it is known that social identities are both fluid and rigid in nature? In the Tamil Nadu case, the Nadars are an example. They were mildly untouchable (Hardgrave, 1969; Good, 1999) and were denied entry into temples, but at a later stage claimed a higher status. They were never fully classified as an untouchable caste, so whether their status mobility could be

emulated by untouchable castes remains questionable. Such contests over status and position are often played out in space. In terms of political understanding, the idea of a public space is manifested in the efforts of the subaltern classes in particular as it becomes imperative for them to create a public space in which to be visible and showcase themselves as part of the public. ‘Public space is a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen’ (Mitchell, 1995: 115-116). Thus by claiming/reclaiming public space, social groups themselves become public.

As Taylor puts it: ‘Performance is a two-edged sword, as powerful in contesting power as in maintaining it,’ (Taylor, 2014: 338). Power, we might argue, ‘lies in the ways claims are enacted and made visible. Who controls the resonant symbols, gestures, colours, language and what are these made to transmit?’ (Ibid: 340) The GP events exemplify that duality, either serving to maintain power or dispute it. This aspect of struggle – the claiming of equal rights over public spaces as a form of representation – is critical to our understanding. This then leads us to see whether the occupation of public space by Dalits could be seen as representational or not. For marginalised groups who have been historically denied access to public discourse and social power, performances have become an effective and innovative vehicle to both amplify their demands and elicit responses. The poor and marginalised utilise performance to articulate social positions, thereby redefining spaces and states of invisibility and visibility. ‘These performances embody social testimonials that speak for the experiences of many other people, who share cultural, social, economic and political marginality’ (Guevara, 2014: 391).

The street as a public space is crucial. It is where the political categories of liberal democracy manifest themselves. One should not forget that historically any effort to politically assert and represent themselves in a public space has been a struggle for Dalits (see for example Ambedkar’s Mahad struggle to draw water from a public tank¹²)

¹² Mahad is a town in Maharashtra where Dalits were denied access to the Chowdar tank meant for public use. Dr. Ambedkar, despite threats, led a massive campaign and drew water from the tank in 1927. Later it

and the occupation of public spaces thus becomes illustrative of a power struggle between the marginalised Dalit community and the dominant upper-caste communities. This accentuates the varying and often opposing perceptions of who owns public spaces. In his essay ‘Take it to the Streets’, Berman (1986: 480) notes how political and spatial categories co-produce each other, ‘where the ideals of modern subjectivity – individuated personhood unencumbered by history, social ties, or obligation, for instance – are spatialised’. My research explores these ideas in a caste context.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at different bodies of literature to place the research question in context. GPs, as a form of performance and contestation in public space are characterised by the intensity of mobilisation and the use of visual signifiers. This potentially indicates the nature of social relationships and levels of contestation, leading us back to both Lefebvre and Mitchell’s theoretical analyses. For Lefebvre, representational spaces are an oppositional category to dominant modes of representation and the production of spaces. Quotidian forms of life and their manifestations in terms of spatial meanings form part of the critique of space and its modes of representation. Mitchell emphasises the importance of subaltern classes creating public spaces to make themselves visible; GPs, with their visible cultural markers and occupation of public space by the marginalised, provide that creation, challenging the established hegemony. Performance, space and caste, thus, lie at the heart of my research. The following chapter describes the methods adopted, before we turn to the data.

was thrown open to Dalits. This watershed struggle has been popularised through various media and is kept alive through social memory (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 2003: 101).

CHAPTER TWO:

Methods, Ethics and Ethnographic Fieldwork

Introduction

This chapter describes my ethnographic and participant observation experiences in South Tamil Nadu. I begin by outlining the primary and secondary research questions behind this project, discuss my positionality and the potential impact of this, detail my research methods and outline how I chose the field site, how I gained access and the ethical issues that arose. Research design refers to the overall strategy chosen to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, to ensure an effective approach towards the research problem (De Vaus, 2001: 8-9). It constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. Though research design is crucial to ethnography, it has to be noted that it is a reflexive process that operates throughout every stage of a project (see Maxwell, 2004).

Research Questions

My research seeks to understand how as components of a broader struggle for equality in Tamil Nadu, Dalits (ex-untouchables) often challenge prevailing caste norms by replicating the practices and conventions of locally dominant groups. The project examines the performative aspects of such struggles by focusing on GPs, public performances undertaken to pay homage to late social and political leaders. It asks how these specific events affect identity formation and thus result in the production of political communities. The objective is to understand how meanings of caste are constructed, negotiated and contested in the contemporary political landscape, especially within public ritual performances and sites. It will focus on the events of Thevar GP and Immanuel GP as sites of contestation, and address the following key questions:

- 1) How are the meanings of caste constructed, negotiated and contested in the contemporary political landscape?
- 2) How is Thevar dominance enacted, and how is the Dalit challenge played out, within public space in southern Tamil Nadu? How do Dalits articulate their ongoing incursion into public space and how do Thevars respond to this?
- 3) How are caste authority and hegemony mediated today?
- 4) How, if at all, does caste define the everyday lives of Dalits and Thevars? How does it influence social interaction, and what implications does it have in terms of production of locality? Does GP as an event provide a space to connect/re-connect with the community?

A range of secondary questions emerge from this focus:

- a) How do localised networks of caste power operate in both rural and urbanising/modernising environments?
- b) How is Dalit counter resistance to domination expressed or performed?
- c) What registers are used in the public performances? How are they staged and how does that produce or generate dominance?
- d) What is the spatial pattern and distribution of violence? How (if at all) is caste violence woven into caste commemorations and the everyday life of the people engaged in violence?
- e) How are these major events policed, and what methods of policing are used in both cases?

f) How gendered are these public performances?

g) How do GPs, in both cases, address questions of sub-castes within a collective identity? Are there fragmentations?

In short, my research attempts a sociological analysis of contemporary caste relations in southern Tamil Nadu. I propose to document contemporary caste relations, taking into account public performances, and to understand the importance of caste as a social and cultural signifier. I also document the everyday dynamics of caste through my village studies. Being a native speaker of the language and the dialect, facilitated interviews and analysing written material, and all translations are my own.

Research Methods

Given my interest in meaning, political performance and the occupation of space, I adopted an ethnographic approach. This choice of method is also informed by previous research on caste identities. Srinivas (1962: 120-135), for instance, says, 'To understand the internal dynamics of caste and the various idioms attached to its functional aspects it becomes imperative to understand caste and have a field view rather than a book view'. As my main focus was on the GPs, I began my research with participant observation of these in Paramakudi and Pasumpon. I then sought to unpack and understand these events by following informants to their villages, interviewing leaders and documenting the visual field of caste events. My approach is captured in the following:

Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, observing what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts, and gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 3).

As part of the participant observation process, which formed the core of my data collection, I attended both the GPs and other public rituals, staying in the respective areas in order to document preparations and capture how each event unfolded.

Participation, observation and casual and friendly interactions and conversations formed the main methods. Whilst the two GPs are the most significant events in the caste calendar of Tamil Nadu, they are not the only occasions on which caste identities are performed. In order to better grasp the socio-cultural context and to grasp the complex ways in which caste identities are performed and discussed, I attended a further 19 conferences, memorials and GPs. Apart from Immanuel and Thevar GPs, I attended GPs for Mookaiah Thevar, Marudhu Pandiar, and Velu Nachiar. Not all such events are described as GPs. Other leader-centred events included Puli Thevar's 300th birth anniversary, Dheeran Chinnamalai's Birth Anniversary and Malaichamy's 25th death anniversary. One of the central elements in the creation of collective identity is the celebration of past 'martyrs' for the cause. I, therefore, participated in the anniversaries for Madakottai Subbu, and the killings at Unjanai, Melavalavu, Perungamanallur, Tamirabharani, and 'Aivar Dhinam' Anniversary at Keezhathooval. Given the imbrication of caste and politics, I took part in the Agamudaiyar Resurgence State Level Conference, the VCK Silver Jubilee Conference, the Devendra Voluntary Trust Madurai Declaration Conference, the Mallar Social Pride and Rights Retrieval Conference, Pattali Makkal Katchi's South Zone Conferenc, the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front's Second State Level Conference, and Puthiya Tamilagam's two-day Political Conference at Mahabalipuram.¹³

Whilst high-profile public events offer an insight into the performance of caste, it is vital to grasp how this is embedded in everyday identities, practices and relations. Therefore, I stayed in both Dalit dominated villages near Paramakudi, Madurai and Tirunelveli and Thevar dominated villages in Kamuthi and Mudukulathur to observe how caste determines their everyday lives. I stayed in Paramakudi intermittently for a total of 35 days and stayed in Mudukulathur and Kamudhi for 15 days in total. I stayed for 10 days in both Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. This aspect of the research was critical to understanding the 'banal' or everyday underpinnings of caste collectives (cf. Billig 1995), and illustrated how exclusive identities and competitive associationalism shape

¹³ Details of these will be discussed later in the thesis. The events cover a broad cross section of castes and a mix of memorials, conferences, and GPs. Taken together they offered a clear sense of the field of caste-based events in Tamil Nadu.

social space on a day-to-day basis.

Observations, chats and informal interviews were all recorded in fieldnotes. Ethnographers employ a number of strategies when it comes to note-taking, especially in more public settings. I carried small notebooks and recorded key events and conversations either at the time or as soon as possible after the event based on how comfortable my respondents were. My previous experience as a journalist helped with taking short notes that were later written up in more detail. Mechanical devices were used where appropriate, though I was aware of the limitations of devices like audio recorders, which do not capture accompanying information about body language, movement, physical interaction. I used a digital SLR camera and Apple iPod to record videos, which were most effective in collecting information about events and behaviour, while audio recorders helped me in documenting conversations and interviews as well as music. Ethical considerations were to the fore, and I obtained verbal permission before making audio or video recordings and I never engaged in any clandestine or surreptitious recording. Cameras and videos are common at such events, and so I did not stand out. The videos and images helped me to playback the key moments of the event and analyse them accordingly. They were key to capturing the minutiae of rituals and performances.

Whilst my research does not qualify as a ‘visual ethnography’, photography was an important aspect of my research. Firstly, like Schwartz (1989: 125), I found that:

The camera itself became an important means of entering into the social life of the community, allowing me to engage in understandable, task-oriented activity in the course of observation. My picture-taking provided residents with an obvious reason to start up a conversation, and the longer I made photographs, the more people I met.

Secondly, the photographs and videos served as important aids to memory and forms of note-taking. Caste processions were busy, complex and long drawn-out events. Interconnected spatial relations and social interactions are central to my project and images helped me identify the key locations of temples and village squares, spatial markers and visual signifiers in public spaces. A study focusing on processions and

parades needs to look for visual signifiers and carefully document the materials that form the processions. I took numerous photographs documenting various aspects of the GP, including visual signifiers like flex boards, bill boards and posters to aid memory and analysis of the content and aesthetics used. These images are reproduced here where they support the argument, to enable the readers to assess the basis for the claims being made.

For the recorded speeches and interviews, transcription was a tedious process. I took all efforts to ensure that I transcribed interviews soon after they took place so that I could fill gaps or interpret uncertain parts of the recording and add details about the context of the recording. It was tough to maintain consistency here. My experience in translating content from Tamil into English was helpful, but it was a challenge to translate idiomatic speech as this is culturally-driven and has a unique imprint in terms of its meaning in the given language. As a translator, I tried to make sure that the culturally significant/private idiom of the speech is retained in the translation. Good friends who are prominent writers in Tamil helped me in this process whenever I had doubts. Following Murchison (2010), I carried a proper research journal apart from my notebooks. The journal was used to jot down important information, like the contact details of important interlocutors, and event details etc. This flagged up issues to probe, outlined incipient analysis and helped to identify potential biases or particular perspectives that I could bring to bear on my research.

Positionality and Access

Given my focus on meaning, identity and practice, my ethnography married close observation with formal and semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with prominent political leaders, heads and office bearers of various social organisations representing the castes, officials belonging to police departments, and men, women and youth from both the castes participating in different events. Overall I conducted 102 interviews, including both semi-structured and formal interviews, of which only 10 were with women which is a serious limitation of the research. 56 interviews were conducted

among members of the Pallar community both in rural and urban areas. 46 interviews were conducted among members of the Thevar community. The interviews with the leaders of the community were normally more than an hour long as it required a lot of detailed explanation and questions were more or less framed for the interview. In terms of individual and group interviews among informants most of the interviews were between 45 minutes to 1 hour and a few exceeded 1 hour. The ethics of research are explained below.

I used a mix of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling and tried to capture as many different perspectives as possible. Purposive sampling entailed selecting participants based on their standing, specialist knowledge, or role. For instance, I used existing contacts with prominent Dalit and Thevar leaders to interview them more than once. Interviewing leaders offered insights into the thinking behind events and what they hoped to achieve through their organisations. Leader interviews, however, are less good at elucidating how events are experienced and engaged with on the ground (Gorringe 2005). I, therefore, used snowball methods to speak to a diversity of people in each case, especially in village settings. During large events, furthermore, I employed convenience sampling based on who was present and willing to talk to me. Informal interviews were conducted in teashops, in houses, at village squares and at meetings and conferences. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and focused on perceptions about caste and everyday caste practices. Through conversation and interviews, one can get detailed explanations and rationales as well as background information that helps make sense out of other pieces of information that may lack context.

Rapley (2004: 25) notes the need to distinguish between the hidden narratives of the underlying voices and the dominant tone that comes out of the interview. Combining interviews with ethnography was helpful here and afforded some sense of the interplay between assertions and practices. Interviews may also intimidate and silence marginalised voices, who may be more likely to open up when in groups (see Hall, 1969). My group interviews mostly happened at village squares, within temple spaces and during conferences. I conducted 15 and 12 group interviews among Pallars and

Thevars respectively. Group interviews with enthusiastic participation helped me to draw information that was otherwise not possible in individual interviews where face-to-face interaction makes people not to open up and I also found other group members recall and remember things stimulating each other (Gillham, 2005). These interviews brought me as a researcher closer to even more respondents; they are flexible and permit considerable probing. Women were quite comfortable in-group interviews. The group interview also provided me with some insights on the nature of social relationships in the field, for example how organized they were as a caste group etc., their outlook on caste and other social interactions. The body language, non-verbal accounts of the respondents too were helpful in understanding the caste dynamics. Despite its advantages group interviews also carry disadvantages, as I saw how the opinions of one member influenced the other and slowly affected the nature of answers (Ritzer and Ryan 2010 : 483) In a group the pressure towards compliance was a reality and at times respondents were affected by the attitude of one member as there were histories of conflicting attitudes which affected the group's response.

This research topic is close to my heart and I have been closely following Dalit politics and attending conferences and meetings, trying to understand the changing dynamics of caste since being a young activist in the mid-1990s. As a researcher, I had to be aware of the subjective bias and power relations that stem out of ethnographic research. Interviews and participant observation methods are subject to the interpretation of the researcher. 'Ethnographic research has indeed been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing power inequalities and it continues to be implicated. It enacts power relations. But its functions within these relations are complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic' (Clifford, 1986: 9). On one level, I am an insider studying his own culture. The social researcher set in a foreign culture has to struggle to gain insights; but in their own culture must struggle to withdraw from it (Hennigh, 1981: 125). Aguilar notes that some see insider status as leading to subjective involvement, and as 'a deterrent to objective perception and analysis' (1981: 15). Insider ethnography is seen as biased and as beginning with political aims.

Alternatively, insiders studying their own cultures can offer new angles of vision and a depth of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in a unique way (Clifford, 1986: 9). Studying local cultures has a long history and it also helps to provide a holistic picture with detailed minutiae that the outsider might fail to understand or identify. 'The concept of reflexivity acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 15). It is important, therefore, that ethnographers sketch out their theoretical prejudices, and the wider values that they carry forward to the research process (Hammersley, 1990). In social sciences, there exists a broader perception and a growing recognition on questions of reflexivity, and it is widely believed that being reflexive helps improve the legitimisation of the research material (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). For Hertz (1997: viii), 'the reflexive ethnographer does not simply report "facts" or "truths" but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about.' Therefore, it was extremely important to continually subject myself to questioning to be reflexive about data collection and interpretation.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 92) identify that, 'Although it would be wrong to think of the effects of these as absolutely determinate or fixed, such characteristics as gender, age, race, and ethnic identification,' may shape relationships with gatekeepers, sponsors, and people under study in important ways. The positionality of the researcher is a crucial factor in social research as the researcher is inevitably influenced by the social location, which provides a certain perspective on a certain phenomenon (Jorgenson, 1989: 53-54). Hailing from a Dalit caste, questions of positional bias and other limitations crop up. These include, the perceptions of the research subjects about me as a researcher. In my case, my identity as a 39 year old male Dalit affected my access and my research in several key ways. Most obviously, it made access to women difficult. Discourses of honour and shame are prevalent in Tamil Nadu, and speaking to a non-related male alone was impossible for many women in my fieldsites. This helps to explain the relative lack of women's voices in this research. Where possible I sought to

hold group interviews or informal conversations with women in the field so as to capture their voices and perspectives, but this remains a key limitation of the research.

My identity also rendered access to Thevars problematic. They wanted to know why I was interested in them and were suspicious of a Dalit researcher asking about their politics. Two factors helped here: Firstly, I had already established contacts with Thevars during my journalistic work and I had access to most of the different factions of the Thevar organisations and political parties. Secondly, they were delighted that I was paying attention to Muthuramalinga Thevar who they regard as often neglected in academic studies. I also used the help of Thevar leaders to approach possible informants. This carried the potential to influence my data, but the possible bias was mitigated by the ability to access and interview Thevars rather than just Dalits. I also had to be wary of my own perceptions. I was initially hesitant to stay in Thevar neighbourhoods, for example, but through good contacts in the field I was welcomed to stay and was provided with key information and data. With regard to Pallars, my Dalit identity made it easier to access informants and explain my interest, but I faced questions relating to my objectivity as I belong to the Hindu Sambavar caste, which is a different section among the Dalits. Intra-Dalit competition and rivalry, mean that some Pallar respondents were sceptical about my motives. I also needed to be careful not to let my own politics and opinions colour the interpretation and analysis of their events.

Another important issue is the presence of the ethnographer in the field and its impact on the outcomes of behaviour and actions of the potential informants. I tried to make sure that my presence did not have any major influence by investing time to build rapport with my participants, and immersing myself in my research location. I built on already available networks, to gain good contacts at the event sites and followed them for interviews. Throughout the research care was taken to overcome possible prejudices (both towards and from me), by capturing multiple perspectives and deploying multiple methods. This was the main reason to embrace a multi-sited ethnography.

Use of Archives

Though my project is primarily ethnographic, I used archival documents such as newspapers, periodicals, booklets and government reports to contextualise my micro-ethnographic research. Apart from my own collection of a few published and unpublished official committee reports, which I had acquired from Dalit Resource Centre, Madurai and People's Watch (A Human Rights Organisation) and Dalit activists, I collected newspaper and magazine reports on caste violence between these castes. My interlocutors were quite generous and shared a lot of documents, which helped me in my analysis, especially in understanding the spatial and temporal structures of violence. These documents highlighted issues that my interlocutors saw as important and worthy of analysis, and pointed me towards issues, which otherwise I may have neglected.

Ethics

The research was carried out in a volatile political situation, marked by major incidents of caste violence. An awareness of the existing power relations and social realities of these places was crucial and given due consideration, especially while recording oral testimonies. As a researcher, when discussing caste violence I was sensitive to the possible effects to their mental health. I made sure to minimise disturbances both to the subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their social environment and I also provided them with inputs on approaching human rights organisations like People's Watch and Evidence (both based in Madurai) to help them with legal and other forms of counselling. Though anonymity will help, I also anticipated the possibility of long-term effects on individuals or groups as a result of the research. In order to address this issue I concealed information about their identities in required cases, took appropriate measures to remove identifiers, and also used pseudonyms accordingly.

Informed consent was important and I was aware that it is a process rather than a one-off event. It required renegotiation over time and as a social researcher I had to return to this

question periodically. Participant consent was ensured at all levels. All the interviews, both recorded and unrecorded, were done after getting due consent and identities in all required cases were kept strictly confidential. Given that I was also interviewing known activists and leaders in a small area, I made it clear to my informants and participants that it is highly unlikely that their identities would be totally concealed in terms of field notes and journals. I also offered such respondents the opportunity to be named in the thesis. Many of them wanted to be named in recognition of their work and I respected these wishes. The aims, objectives and methods of research were clearly explained and the stated benefits of doing such research were confined to an academic context.

Considering my own safety, I avoided highly volatile zones within the Tuticorin and Tirunelveli regions where fresh bouts of retaliatory murders took place during fieldwork. Both my informants and the police alerted me to avoid certain villages and I duly responded, instead meeting the villagers in Tirunelveli town to conduct interviews. I avoided controversial issues and circumstances. My experience as a journalist for a period of 8 years in an English language national daily helped me to assess the situation and proceed further. The primary ethical responsibility of an ethnographer is linked to their potential and actual informants. I took adequate efforts to minimize this risk as far as possible by taking the practical steps detailed in the *Code of Practice* issued by the Social Research Association (2001) and by abiding to The School of Social and Political Science's ethical audit for research approval. Whilst this means that I did not interview those most affected by, or practising, recent violence, I was still able to get a sense of the day-to-day practices and discourses that feed into and emerge from collective violence.

Analysis

Analysis of the collected materials was done simultaneously whenever it was possible so as to ensure that the specificities of context were not lost. After collecting the data, I methodically coded the collected data into themes, related these themes to the research questions, and cross-checked the various sources of data against each other. For example in the case of newspaper reports I analysed to content to see what types of sources were

used. Based on the history of media reporting I was also careful in quoting them or using it for analysis. Published reports of government and non-governmental organisations concerning caste violence were also used to corroborate information. The Commission reports on atrocities and violence were used to a lesser extent to understand policing methods and the public inquest reports of NGOs on police and state actions were referred to in order to substantiate the inquiry on policing. This process of analysis drew upon earlier studies and entailed concentrated reflection, which includes critical assessment of competing interpretations. Once the categories and concepts were identified from the recorded data, I tried to connect them with the specified themes and evaluated them to examine the conclusions.

Conclusion

By studying both sides of the conflict, this study is committed to enhancing our understanding of caste dynamics. Individual perspectives were combined with analysis of important, collective public performances engaged in the production of a political community, and the visual and spatial registers through which they operate. Whilst ethnographic research is necessarily partial and only captures key moments in time, I sought to cross-check and contextualise observations and interview-data by reference to archives and documents to get a sense of change over time. My position as a Dalit male undoubtedly shaped the research. This is most clearly seen in the relative lack of women's voices, but may have affected access to and responses from interlocutors as well. Through awareness of my position and painstakingly building rapport, working through established networks and using multiple methods I have tried to minimise possible biases in access to data and interpretation of it. By observing public performances, historical and contemporary documents, observations and interviews I have charted the subjective experiences of participants, and the ways in which caste identities are understood and expressed in public spaces. This research, I hope, will enable us to better understand the production of caste, political community and the nature of caste domination and resistance. Fully comprehending caste dynamics today,

however, requires an appreciation of the past. Chapter Three, therefore, provides the historical context of this study.

CHAPTER THREE:

Locating Thevar Dominance and Pallar Response in a Historical Context

On a balmy day in Madurai, while riding my motorcycle to meet one of my interlocutors I received a call from a journalist friend recounting that a Maravar¹⁴ youth had been murdered near Pattam.¹⁵ The murdered youth, named Muthuraja, was working in a private college. When he came out of his house in the morning to take a bath, a gang of youths belonging to the Pallar¹⁶ community was waiting with sickles and an axe. They pounced on him and killed him. The body was sent to the Government Hospital in Madurai and I made my way there:

The news about the murder began to spread and Thevar youth started pouring in to occupy the main road leading to the Hospital. The agonised relatives of the youth and members of his caste raised placards demanding the immediate arrest of the culprits involved in the murder. As the crowd started to swell, youths blocked the busy road outside the hospital, vehicular traffic came to a standstill and shops nearby quickly brought the shutters down. Hurling abuse against the Dalits, both men and women squatted on the road demanding the immediate intervention of the District Collector and adequate compensation for the bereaved family. Thevar youths, seething in anger, were shouting that they would soon avenge this murder and one of them raising his fist shouted, ‘it was our mistake we should have kept these Dalits under control as we did during our father’s and grandfather’s time. How dare they touch a Maravan?’ A policeman in plain clothes attached to the District intelligence wing explained the history of the events to inquisitive journalist friends and claimed that the murder of Muthuraja was in retaliation for the murder of a Dalit youth. And that, in turn, was actually a revenge killing. The chain of events he narrated linked back to the infamous October 30, 2012, petrol bomb attack, where 7 youths belonging to the Thevar community were killed on their way home from Thevar GP (Field Notes, 2015).

¹⁴ Maravars are a caste of traditional warriors found in the Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu. Along with the Kallars and Agamudaiyars, they are referred to as the Mukkulathors (Three Castes). In popular reference, the term Thevars is used to denote these castes. In my thesis, I will be using the caste names interchangeably in accordance with the context.

¹⁵ A village, which officially comes under Sivaganga District but is close to Madurai city.

¹⁶ Pallars are members of former untouchable castes who are predominantly agricultural labourers. They, along with Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars (Leather workers), form the three major Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu. Politically active members of these communities term themselves ‘Dalits’. The sociological meaning of the category ‘untouchable’ is quite nebulous. The term is no longer in vogue, but in a historical context it is important to define it. ‘Untouchables’ is a sociological category, while ‘Scheduled Castes’ is an administrative category. There are 76 castes listed as SC in Tamil Nadu and there is a hierarchy within the group.

During the protest blockade, the Thevars did not just demand the arrest of the culprits. They also placed a demand with Revenue officials that the government should provide them with their own facilities, including ration shops, milk-booths and schools, as they no longer wished to mingle with Dalits due to the trouble it caused. Such a demand from the Thevars was quite surprising; it is a type of request more commonly made by Dalits. This long history characterised by violence between Thevars and Pallars, described above, emphasised the importance of exploring such a subject. The corpse of Muthuraja was yet another addition to the innumerable lives lost due to caste enmity. Do these mutual killings exemplify the wretched conviction and insidious paralysis of caste hatred? They perpetuate a continuing trend: would this murder not lead to a fresh bout of killings? And could killings solve such a conflict? I aimed to acquire new information on different aspects of these castes in both textual and oral forms through my ethnographic work, merging this with related contexts of power, interest, and political action and discourse.

This chapter places my study in a historical context. The first necessary step in unpacking the sociological dimensions of caste dynamics and conflict is to consider the backgrounds of the castes involved. I begin by setting out their history, using various written texts from the pre-colonial period, and briefly relate colonial perceptions. Then, in the final section, I will show how the landscape and methods of irrigation sustained Thevar dominance in the colonial era and continues to do so. Crucial to understanding the Kallars and Maravars is their colonial subjugation as Criminal Tribes, which tends to haunt them even in the post-colonial context. During the same period, the Dalits (Pallars and Paraiyars) were starting to assert themselves against caste oppression. These important points are discussed in this chapter, moving towards an appraisal of the historical conditions that led to the habitual violence present between these two castes who live in close proximity.

Pre-colonial and Colonial Perceptions of the Thevar Caste

The social, economic, political and cultural contexts - and questions of dominance and subordination - all become pertinent in understanding these castes. The Thevars or Mukkulathors are a composite group of the endogamous Kallar¹⁷, Maravar and Agamudaiyar castes. Thevar is not technically a caste name but a title and its genealogy is unknown. The literal meaning of Thevar is 'heavenly being' or people who belong to the divine world. There is a myth that the three castes of Agamudaiyar, Kallar and Maravar are offspring born to Lord Indra and a celestial woman. These three castes, scattered around most of Southern Tamil Nadu, form a numerous caste cluster and have a very complex history as descendants of royal lineage, thieves, marauding warriors and chieftains. This rich past can be found in colonial and pre-colonial descriptions. Although widely mentioned as martial castes, they were also found to be a settled class engaged in agriculture in the Cauvery Delta. Whether as warriors or cultivators, these castes also carry a history of violence against those placed beneath them in the caste hierarchy. Initially this was against the Nadars, but later the Pallars and Paraiyars were on the receiving end (Hardgrave, 1969; Pandian, 2000).

Before we delve into the details highlighting the various accounts of the Thevars, I would like to explain the ingrained perceptions of community and caste at play in these accounts. Pre-colonial versions record native stereotypes of the castes concerned and the colonial accounts were written in the light of the singling out by colonial officers of the martial Thevars castes as a perennial problem associated with various forms of governmentality (Pandian, 2005). As such accounts shape self-perceptions and actions, however, they are important to document. We begin with how they are referred to in ancient Tamil literature.

According to Tamil literature, the landscape is defined in terms of *Tinai* (landscapes).

¹⁷ For more on Kallar history, see Dumont, 1986 (1957), Blackburn (1978) and Dirks (1987).

The five *tinai*s are referred to in the earliest Tamil text available, *Tholkappiyam*, which concerns the grammar of the Tamil language. They consist of *Kurinji* (hilly terrains), *Mullai* (pasture and woodlands), *Neithal* (the sea), *Palai* (arid stretches) and *Marutham* (agricultural tracts). According to early Tamil historiography, *tinai* were associated with distinct forms of economic activity and their occupants were classified accordingly. The Kallars and Maravars were inhabitants of the arid lands and were believed to be involved in looting and plunder, and the Pallars, who were basically agricultural labourers, were part of the agricultural wetlands called *Marutham* (Gurukkal, 1993: 3). Another body of ancient Tamil literary work, the Sangam poetry, terms the Maravars as ruthless fighters. A Kalittokkai poem says that:

Of strong limbs and hardy frames and fierce-looking as tigers, wearing long and curled locks of hair, the blood-thirsty Maravar, armed with the bow bound with leather, ever ready to injure others, shoot their arrows at poor and helpless travellers, from whom they can rob nothing, only to feast their eyes on the quivering limbs of their victims. (Kalittokai IV 1-5, in Kanakasabha Pillai, 1966: 42-43)

Maravar *Nadu* (country) is an arid, plain landscape that is made up of the former kingdoms and zamindaris (estates) of Ramnad and Sivaganga. The region known for its backwardness, which is attributed to the late penetration of the modernising colonial state, has a long history of being a haven for the Kallars and Maravars during military conflicts. The modernising state was resisted at different levels during this period.¹⁸ Originally the Maravars lived in the southern part of the Tirunelveli district and southeast portion of the adjoining districts of Sivaganga and Ramnad, but following economically induced migration, the population spread across Southern Tamil Nadu. They were said to be part of the traditional police system – *kudikaval* (house protection) and *oorkaaval* (village protection) – but colonial accounts echo the *Sangam* literature in depicting them as being involved in looting and highway robbery as the arid landscape afforded limited livelihood opportunities (Fawcett, 1903; Mosse, 2009).

These plains, along with the Eastern part of Madurai, formed the stronghold of Kallars

¹⁸ According to Mosse (2009), the current Ramnathapuram and Sivaganga districts formed the erstwhile Ramnad Kingdom until 1730. Instead of direct British rule these kingdoms were turned into Zamindari estates in 1803.

and were seen as a region with a ‘high degree of illegibility to the British government, where the institutions of the pre-colonial state order continued in a hybrid form, although rendered progressively dysfunctional by a centralising colonial power’ (Mosse, 2009: 164). ‘The Kallars were in their origin soldiers out of work’, noted the Madras Board of Land Revenue in 1896 (Pandian, 2005: 4). Blackburn (1978) says that the Kallars were feudatories of the Sovereign in the Madura region. The headman among the Kallars, known as *Ambalakkarar*, was quite powerful and earned respect from Kallars and other castes. Highly independent in nature, these Kallar *Nadus* were difficult zones in terms of collecting tax revenue during the Nayak rule and under the British. The independent nature of these regions, and their functioning as Sovereigns on their own, is critical to our understanding of existing caste relations. The cultural and political baggage of the pre-colonial and colonial periods has ramifications in the present context and results in major confrontations between the Kallars and other castes, especially Pallars, whom they see as a threat to their social dominance.

During the 1920s and 30s many castes engaged in writing their own histories, both to stake a claim in the hierarchy and as a form of political communication. This was an after effect of British census operations. In 1923, Na. Mu Venkatasamy Nattar of the Kallar community started writing *Kallar Charithiram* (History of the Kallars). The author tried to identify the erstwhile Chola, Pallava, Kalabirar and Muttaraiyar monarchs as members of the Kallar caste (Dirks, 2011; Nattar, 2013 (1923)). This claim is not unique, but it was an early attempt to lay claim to a royal past. There are now many castes (Vanniyars, Udayars, Vellalars, Thevars, Mutharaiyars and Pallars) who lay claim to the Tamil monarchs. The annual *Sadhaya Vizha* (birth anniversary) of Raja Raja Cholan, the king of Chola Empire who ruled between 985 and 1014 A.D., is an official government function and every year these castes fight to prove that the king belongs to their caste (Manikandan, 2015). In most Thevar dominated places, caste was embedded in a political context of Kingship. This meant, among other things, that the prevalent caste ideology was less about purity and pollution, but more concerned with royal authority and honour and was associated with notions of power, dominance and order (Dirks, 1987: 7). Except for the southern districts of Tirunelveli and Tuticorin, which were originally wetlands and served as the domain of rich Brahman enclaves

(later transferred to Thevars) with huge temple structures, the rest of the Thevar dominated areas of the dry lands were associated with a form of patron-client relationship between the Thevars and other castes. The specific form of this relationship and its importance to the on-going study will be discussed later in this chapter.

Colonial Subjugation of the Thevars

Given the above, it is not surprising that the Thevars were central to the colonial governmentality project. For almost a century they were represented as a classic example of policing problems and were the victims of both caste stereotypes and racial prejudice as the archetypal marauders of the southern country. Kallan/Kallar in Tamil means robber, thief or deceitful person. Both British travel accounts and official government records represent the Kallars and Maravars as savage tribes involved in thievery and plunder. During the colonial period, both colonial and native accounts were filled with dubious reports of the Thevars having a propensity to commit crime. For the colonial state, this indirectly meant that the community had to mend its ways and it therefore deemed it legitimate to subject them to surveillance and severe forms of repression (Pandian, 2005).

Whilst not contesting dominant accounts, Subaltern Studies historian, Arnold comments that the famine in Madras and falling economic conditions were a key factor that pushed people towards crime (1984: 68). Declining economic conditions in the Madras Presidency, partly due to colonial policies, saw the disintegration of the traditional *kaval* (police) system. This forced the Kallars in the region into crime and fed into what were called the anti-Kallar riots.¹⁹ The Kallars were accused of treachery for using their role as policemen to steal cattle and then ask for *Tuppu Coolie* (Financial reward) from the cultivators in order to retrieve the stolen cattle.

¹⁹ Peasant communities in and around Madurai came together as a movement and took efforts in 1896 to evict the Kallars from all their settlements based on the assessment and a native stereotype that they are not civil and are engaged in thievery. For more on the Anti-Kallar Riots, see Thurston (1909) and for a detailed analysis see Pandian (2005).

The anti-Kallar riots and the rising colonial perception that the Thevars (Kallars and Maravars) had an inclination towards thievery and required reform became part of the administrative discourse towards the close of nineteenth century. This also meant that the pillars of security and self-governance, which defined the colonial project, were under threat. The British government came up with a legal system to identify and classify communities involved in dacoity and other crime. In response to official stigmatisation and economic decline, the social dominance and standing of Maravars was threatened. Against this backdrop the rising status of lower caste Shanars led to the 1899 Sivakasi (also known as anti-Shanar) riots, which saw Maravars inflict heavy damages upon the Shanars in a bid to retain their standing.²⁰ All these incidents culminated in the colonial government bringing the CTA to Madras Presidency.

At the time of its introduction in the Madras presidency, when the government inquired whether there was a need for the implementation of the Act and asked for a list of criminal tribes, J. Twigg, the District Magistrate of Madurai and A. W. B. Higgens, the District Magistrate of Tirunelveli, accepted the implementation of (CTA), with the Kallars and Maravars in mind. Officials in the other districts, however, rejected it on the grounds that there were no such communities there and stated that the prevailing laws were sufficient to tackle crime (G.O. No. 473, Judicial, 31 March 1897). The majority of the victims of the act were from the Thevar caste, but by 1911, it had been employed in many districts and the number of castes listed as criminal tribes had grown. In total, 153 communities were brought under the purview of CTA and Kallars and Maravars featured prominently among them. A whole class of martial tribes were depicted as habitual criminals and were subject to colonial subjugation. They were treated according to the binary of civilised subjects/savages within colonial administrative discourse and were seen as requiring punitive measures to reform them. Driven by concerns about security, the ‘criminal Tribes’ became subjects of the moralising process of the colonial state. Statistics show that 18 per cent of the population of southern districts of Madras Presidency was made up of Kallars (409,811), Maravars (296,849) and Agamudaiyars

²⁰ Shanars are a caste group who are referred to as Nadars. Their traditional occupation is toddy tapping, which was seen as polluting. They were once regarded as mildly untouchable castes and were denied entry into temples. See Hardgrave (1969).

(296, 849). The majority of the victims were from these castes and the labelling affected the community as a whole and is therefore significant to my study (Pandian, 2005: 24).

Under the powers of the CTA, 1911, members of groups listed as criminal tribes had their fingerprints taken and their mobility restricted. The refusal to register fingerprints was a criminal offence punishable by six months imprisonment or a fine of Rs.200, or both (Joseph, 2003; Karthikeyan, 2012a; Mugil Nilavan, 2010). The strict implementation of the CTA was arguably driven by economic concerns, as the colonial state prioritised the support of the agrarian elite. 'In April 1920, the Piramalai Kallars rioted in Madurai and a subsequent official enquiry at which Congress leader George Joseph was present directed that Section 10(a)(fixed hours during which worst characters and active members have to report to police) be applied more sparingly in future,'(Joseph, 2003: 72). Representations made by him and others resulted in a more humane approach by the government against these communities. The act was finally repealed under independent India. Now I will turn to the colonial accounts of my other caste under study, the Pallars.

Pallars as Subaltern Agents

Colonial accounts describe the Pallars as castes stigmatised by untouchability. They were a class of agricultural labourers chiefly found in the delta region of Thanjavur, and Tiruchirapalli. They were also found in large numbers in rural Madurai, Ramnad, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts. A fair number resided in parts of Salem and Coimbatore, but in the remaining districts they were only found in small quantities (Madras Census Report, 1891 cf, Thurston, 1909). Due to modern forms of migration induced by economic development, today they are scattered in various parts of Tamil Nadu. The genealogy of the caste name suggests that they were skilled wetland labourers who were living in low-lying lands called *pallam* (pit). Thurston (1909) describes them as low status or as agrestic slaves tilling the land of upper castes. Spatially, they were located outside the village proper in detached hutments called *pallacheris* (dwellings of Pallars), which were close to other neglected spatial areas

called *paraicheris* (dwellings of Paraiyars). Mythological accounts say that they were created by Lord Devendra to labour for the Vellalans (David, 1977). A few Pallars have also been known to claim that they were, like the Kallars, descendants of Lord Indra and are superior to Paraiyars and Chakkilyars as they do not consume beef.

The *Tanjore Manual* (1883) states that ‘the Pallan and Paraiyan are rival castes each claiming superiority over the other.’ The *Coimbatore Manual* (1887) shows that the ‘Pallan has in all times been a serf labouring in the low wetlands for his masters the Brahmans and Goundans. The Pallan is a short stoutish black man, sturdy, meat eater and not over-clean in person or habit, but very industrious in his favourite wetlands’ (Thurston, 1909: 476-489). Whilst such colonial accounts need to be taken with caution, Pallars are basically agricultural labourers and their caste status associated with ritual pollution is not quite clear. The work of Dharma Kumar (1965), Gough (1981) and Kapadia (1995) show us that the Pallars were agricultural slaves and were defined as *Pannaiyals* (labourers attached to the land) while non-Dalit castes who were engaged in agriculture labour were called *velaikkarar* (servant). There are instances where the Pallars have been involved in death rituals as gravediggers, but historically these were practices confined to certain geographical areas.

Deliège (1996) shows us that though on the threshold of untouchability, the Valaiyars as a caste who are structurally similar to Pallars do not mix with them and maintain a distance to show that they are not Pallars. Deliège defines Pallar by comparing them with the Kallars. He says that the values and behaviour of some castes sharply differ from those of others and that the Kallars of Tamil Nadu are a clear example of a fierce and warlike caste that inspire awe in other communities: ‘I believe that among the untouchables the Pallars also have a caste tradition that makes them different from other castes.’ They are considered to be more aggressive than the Paraiyars, and he compares this with mythological constructions where the Paraiyars claim a Brahman ancestry, while the Pallars claim to have a martial tradition and associate themselves as descendants of Lord Indra (Deliège, 1996: 76-77). Though Pallars claim to be of a superior status among Dalits, they remain the principal victims of the caste-based

violence meted out by the Mukkulathors. Caste identities, thus, are forged through interaction and are shaped by the past. The next section considers how irrigation as a state project not only changed the landscape, but impacted upon social relations and provided a source of dominance for the Thevars.

Landscape and Irrigation as a Means of Social Dominance

Landscape can provide us with a symbolic view in terms of the cultivation of self; Pandian argues that the lowland agricultural tracts were populated by people who not only cultivated the land but also cultivated themselves in opposition to the inhabitants of arid regions, who were seen as the 'antithesis of agrarian civility' (Pandian, 2007). There are linkages to modern forms of identity construction, here, but Pandian's argument does not take into account the power of the state (loosely defined) to transform both the physical and the social landscape, and how the landscape can be used to traverse social power, status and dominance. In the following pages, the discussion concerns how the dry lands, through tank irrigation, became the source of Thevar dominance.

In the landscape of the Ramnad and Sivaganga region, Mosse (2009: 166) sees systems at the margins of state control as useful lenses to understand the shifting boundary between state bureaucracy and community institutions. Mosse's study is significant as, unlike Dirks (1987) and Price (1996), it provides us with an opportunity to understand the caste component in the processes of engagement between state power and local authority (Thevar) and how these were transformed by tank irrigation. Mosse, following Scott (1998), has explicated the idea that the state transforms social and natural landscapes through projects of administrative re-ordering. He shows how tank irrigation changed the political economy of the Ramnad and Sivaganga estates in the colonial era. Mosse (2009: 163) says that, 'Administrative re-ordering is done through censuses or surveys, maps or mono cropping, scientific farming or forestry and the state thus produces simplifications which order, regulate and render an otherwise illegible social life legible and therefore subject to rational management and control'. The colonial state

in India, Mosse claims, could be 'regarded as the epitome of Scott's modernising, centralising state'.

An important aspect of irrigation was the practice of using it. The tanks were developed in a segmented manner, however with the increase in population and cultivable space, independent units were established. This expansion was closely linked to the rising profile of the Maravar caste warrior chiefs and the militarization of the plains area of south India under the Vijayanagar Empire (Mosse, 2009: 167). The Maravars and Kallars became extremely powerful during this time and established themselves as heads within the *nadus*, which became their domains of authority. Their chiefs were called *Nattars* (Heads of Nadu) and the lesser domains of the Maravar village headmen within the larger warrior polity were called *Ambalakkarar*. If the *nadus* defined the domains of influence and power of local Maravar/Kallar warrior leadership, they did so because they were the primary units of social and agrarian organisation based upon links established through both kinship and drainage (Mosse, 2003, 2009). The *Ambalakarans* took it upon themselves to adjudicate disputes that arose among the inhabitants belonging to different castes in the *nadu*.²¹ They used to hear complaints, hold inquiries and punish offenders. They wielded considerable power to intervene in any kind of transaction or transfer of property. No land could be alienated from one man to another without the permission of the *Ambalakkarans*. Despite being a pre-colonial practice and despite modern forms of justice system, the *nadu* system with *Ambalakkarans* judging affairs is still in vogue.

In direct relation to the practicalities of irrigation, warrior chiefs organized the construction or repair of tanks and protected cultivating communities in return for the right to a share of the produce of the land (Dirks, 1987: 148, 153, Mosse, 2009: 167-169). This irrigation-driven political and administrative structure, thus, provided the means by which Maravar and Kallar *nadu* chiefs and headmen pushed the frontiers of cultivation forward and created nodes for the collection of revenue and military recruits.

²¹ A very polished account of the *Ambalakkaran* system can be seen in Blackburn's work. He cites them as being a just and less strenuous source of justice than spending time and money in a modern justice system (Blackburn, 1978).

It also gave them a form of legitimacy in establishing patron-client relationships at local levels. This, coupled with securing titles and honours from royalty and at local temples, enmeshed political and ritual power. This is crucial in terms of understanding social relations at a regional level. Resources were in the hands of Thevars and there were clear connections between these resources and ritual power. This continues in post-colonial conditions and it is here that the local temples, which are outside the domain of state power (Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments), become domains of social power and arenas for enacting hierarchy.

During this time, the warrior chiefs and their kin (many of whom were from the Kallar and Maravar castes) who supported British rule were established as zamindars and became proprietors of estates under 'permanent settlement' (Mosse, 2009: 169-171). The gifting of village land and irrigation structures remained the traffic of political process (Dirks, 1986: 324). Land and water were treated as political assets, which authorised the Maravar caste's political dominance.

The Pallars (Dalits) were the hereditary water turners in the sluices and other forms of irrigation under Maravar control. During the British regime the Pallars' attachment to these state projects were of contested nature. Rupa Viswanath (2014: 208-209) illustrates the contested and fraught nature of caste relations by reference to house-site acquisition:

In 1917, the Panchamas (Dalits) of Thenperambur village in Tanjore asked for new house-sites because, they said, the river Vettar was in danger of flooding the existing *cheri*. The complaint was found to be genuine, unfortunately there were no government-owned lands available for acquisition, meaning that land would have to be bought from a local landowner in a suitable location. A piece of land was chosen, and the Panchamas were ready to pay a rather large part of the full price up front and the remainder in instalments, as well as to perform the necessary labour to raise the elevation of the land – since it too, like their old homestead, was slightly low-lying. The Pallars were very 'keen about owning their own house sites', we are later told, because 'the Kallar mirasidars appear to treat them rather harshly'. Therefore, while the danger of flooding was real enough, it was in fact their landlords' treatment that impelled them to make an official request.

This quote captures the subordinate and marginal position of Pallars vis-à-vis dominant castes and their attempt to draw on the colonial state in their negotiations. In case of Ramnad similarly, the emergence of new markets for cash crops, established transport systems, and the direct involvement of the colonial government in the estates undermined the role of the little kings. Moreover, modern forms of state institution lessened the power of the zamindars (Baker, 1984). During the 1930s, nearly 80 per cent of the Sivaganga wet land had been commuted to cash rent. This shift saw a spate of reports of embezzlement by revenue administrators and village headmen. Organised resistance was also reported in many villages and it brought into focus precisely those elements of the society that had formerly articulated the warrior polity. The resistance focused on Maravar and Kallar caste centres and drew on strong caste organisation and martial culture. ‘The colonial state despite its spectacular theatre of self-representation’ as Kaviraj (1997: 232) notes ‘... remained a rather thin stratum of institutions mostly concerned with revenue and order’. Mosse (2009:180) says, ‘Land and water continued to be ruled, rather than managed and the collapse of irrigation systems in these states were both caused by, and resulted in the loss of legitimate political authority.’

The Indian developmental state started the abolition of Zamindars from 1949 onwards and all irrigation structures became state property. Tanks continue to provide the means to legitimise local power and to acquire wealth and convert it into status. Mosse informs that common property continues to be ruled rather than managed. Thus, while contests over power and local water resources do not appear directly connected to the state, they do revolve around tanks as state property, providing opportunities for men of influence to access, control and redistribute state resources. Today this remains the main source of Thevar power through systems of contracting public works, including, tank deepening, road construction, tree harvesting and charcoal burning. Although the dismantling of the share revenue system weakened the political position of Maravar headmen, they retained their privileged access to contracts with the Public Works Department (PWD) and Highways Department, as well as holding key positions in local administration (Mosse, 2003).

Thevar Dominance and the Seeds of Dalit Resistance

So far we have seen the trajectory of Thevar dominance enhanced by various forms of irrigation. This historical background is necessary to understand how the current dominance of Thevars is linked to the powerful position attained by them through the enmeshment of ritual, political and economic power and how it meant that the social relations in the region were hierarchical and oppressive. The castes lower in the hierarchy suffered a lot, but this does not mean that they were submissive. Dalit resistance in the Kallar-Maravar dominated tracts has a remarkable history. *Kizhakku Mugavai* (East Ramnad) is a place historically known for its oppression of Dalits, and it was here that they asserted themselves against all forms of discrimination beginning as early as 1810. In that year, the first conference of the Depressed Classes was organized in Paramakudi, in which representatives from the southern districts participated (Ilankumaran, 1994).

The Maravars, as we have seen, are known for violently opposing the socio-economic uplift of the lower castes. In the Kazhugumalai (1895) and Sivakasi riots (1899), they resorted to extreme forms of violence as they saw a threat to their reputation as a martial caste in the efforts of the Shanars to shed their image as lower castes and gain upward mobility. The Maravars used force to maintain their hierarchy, status, power and prestige (Hardgrave, 1969; Arnold, 1979; Baker, 1984; Good, 1999; Bandhopadhyay, 2014). There is a pattern where the loss of hegemony is met with violence. As they were not able to control the economic and social ascendancy of the Shanars, the ideological hegemony of the Maravars was seen as slipping. This trend continued into the early 20th century and though there were different forms of resistance from the Depressed Classes, their economic situation limited their response to the Thevars (Kannan, 2000, Pandian, 2000). Whilst Maravars resented the assertion of Shanars, they were not in a position to impose their will over them, because they had independent sources of income. In the case of the Depressed Classes, by contrast, dominance could be enforced both through violent means and through economic boycotts and sanctions. As the Shanars renamed

themselves Nadars (Hardgrave, 1969), the Maravars continued to oppress the Depressed Classes (Dalits), hoping thereby to maintain the hierarchy and to gain recognition for their claims to Kshatriya status.

On behalf of the Ramanathapuram-Tirunelveli Adi Dravida movement, T. Ponnaiah wrote a long complaint copy to Lord Irwin in which he recorded the discriminatory actions taken against the lower castes. He stated that the Kallar-Maravar-Nattar Ambalakkarakar (Vallambar) in the region had joined together to impose restrictions on Adi Dravidars, DKVs and other lower castes and demanded that the Harijans should follow the old traditions in practice before the British came. The reason cited by the Kallars and Maravars was that by restricting their bodily gestures, movements and dressing patterns it becomes easier to distinguish who belongs to which caste. The Dalits were also warned of the serious consequences if they failed to adhere. In response to these wrongs, the complaint letter demanded adequate protection for the Dalits from the Kallars and Maravars. This petition illustrates the defiance of Dalits and their struggles for change (Ilankumaran, 1994).

During the years 1885 to 1908 at Thiruvadanai and Thondi in East Ramnad, the Christian Dalits asserted themselves against caste oppression. When the Christian Dalits of Thalir Maroongur in these areas tried to renovate a church, Maravars under the influence of a local Mudaliyar man attacked them. However, the Pallars, under the influence of Christian Missionaries, had asserted themselves and had pledged not to carry out any menial jobs. They also collectively took a decision to no longer do agricultural work in the fields of caste Hindus. This made life difficult for the caste Hindus who had to make a peaceful agreement and donate the church and the surrounding land to the Dalits (Ilankumaran, 1994: 10).

During the 1930s, Ramanathapuram district was one of the places notorious for caste-based discrimination. Dalits were systematically denied any symbols associated with superior status. J. H. Hutton (1963), the then Census Commissioner, describes about the set of prohibitions imposed on Dalits by dominant castes in this region, including a ban

on wearing jewelry and ornaments and receiving education. The decree did not go unopposed, and was fought against by Dalits led by Thiruthangur Samban, who was the *Talaiyari* (Headman) and Marimuthu. Following this, the Dalits led by T. Ponnaiah under the Adi-Dravida Organisation began the *Sattaikatchi* (Shirt Movement) on 5 August 1930. This movement fought against the injunction preventing Dalits from wearing shirts. (Ilankumaran, 1994: 14).

Indicative of growing caste tensions was a serious clash between Ambalakkars (Nattars) and 'Harijans' (Gandhi's term for Dalits) in Ramnad in which 20 persons, including women were injured. The clash was over the Dalit refusal to help the former in the annual *Jallikattu* festival. The Dalit village was destroyed and property was looted (*Times of India*, 14 Feb, 1934). In 1935, a Dalit named Poochi was murdered in the region too. His killing was remarkable because Poochi was fighting vigorously against a cruel form of untouchability where Dalits were not allowed to wear shirts to cover their upper body. Furthermore, this happened when Mohandas Gandhi was organising campaigns against the practice of untouchability and Poochi's murder brought Gandhi to Devakottai, where he organised a meeting with the local Nattars (Kallars and Maravars). There was also trouble in this region between the Nattars and Dalits over the taking of mud horses through the streets to the local Ayyanar temple, which was a Nattar monopoly. Anyone found violating those established norms was punished (*Times of India*, 22 April, 1935). A.V.Thakkar, secretary of the All India Harijan Board spoke out about the failure of talks held with Nattars who were denying Harijans their civil rights. He appealed to the Nattars not to drive them away to other faiths (*Times of India*, 5 April 1935). Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya of Hindu Mahasabha who was on a South India tour was grieved to hear about the Nattar-Harijan trouble in the Ramnad district and proposed a tour to south India to address issues of temple entry and reconversion of Harijans who converted to Islam (*Times of India* 28 April 1936). In a village near Madurai, the Harijans who wore shirts on Pongal day were asked to remove their shirts and were punished for wearing upper cloth. (*Sunday Times*, 9 March 1952).

What these incidents indicate are a number of points that are central to my analysis. Firstly, they illustrate how mobilisation occurred on caste grounds even during the Self-Respect movement phase of non-Brahminism. Secondly, the example of the Christian Dalit protests in particular highlights the slipping hegemony of the intermediate castes. Finally, they demonstrate the interplay between Dalit assertion and Thevar violence. Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1999) note how upper-castes increasingly resort to violence to maintain their status as caste norms are challenged. The examples of Dalit assertion in this region cited above are significant to our understanding of caste conflict. Interviews here in 2014, demonstrated that accounts of this time still circulate and inform current politics. From the 1930s until today, the caste violence between these groups has escalated in various forms. The changes witnessed in terms of economic mobility, partly supported by governmental reservation benefits and changes in agricultural land holdings and migration, has engendered challenges in retaining and capturing power at the local level. During the last three decades, with changing material conditions and political assertion on the part of the Pallars, the southern districts have witnessed some of the most violent conflicts between Thevars and Pallars. In her ethnography, Mines (2005) has shown how a simple act like the smudging of sacred ash by a Pallar man brought into open the structures of local dominance. For entering the temple, which was barred for Pallars, and smearing sacred ash on his forehead, a case of attempt to steal the brass bell was filed against him. This is an example of how a longstanding antagonism between castes can be both localised and de-localised based upon power relationships. In most of these conflict-based situations, the local structures of power – for example, village gods and temples – act as windows on caste dominance. In 2015 such conflicts were found between the Pallars and Kallars in the villages of Uthapuram and Keezha Orappanar near Madurai, which revolved around the maintenance of social codes in the local temples and festivals and when attempts to subvert it took place, violence erupted. (Sundar, 2015). Temple festivals replicate and reproduce dominance as well as resistance.

Histories of Symbolism, Worship, Modern State and Thevar Dominance?

Caste assumes embodied forms that arise from the structures of inequality described above (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007). The embodied practices and actions of Thevars as a dominant caste group, for example, need to be examined in the context of their past and their present. In relation to the past, their histories as martial castes of warriors, chieftains, little kings and criminalised castes feed into their current standing as a powerful lobby in the recent political history of Tamil Nadu. How the Thevars amassed such political capital is a critical question. The centrality of the Thevars in the construction of South Tamil Nadu as a violent space through various modes of communication (including visual and oral) and the local histories of the area also need to be taken into account (Karthikeyan and Gorringe, 2017).

As rulers of the little kingdoms of Pudukottai (Kallars), Sivaganga and Ramnad (Maravars), Price argues that from a feudatory point of view, 'the embedded nature of symbols of worship with notions of power, honour and authority helped to mitigate the potential of colonial hegemony for radical disruption in local political cultures' (Price, 1996: 4). She further asserts that the kingly culture still shapes Tamil political discourse, and implies that the potential for subaltern autonomy is seriously compromised by the participation of subalterns in local institutions of worship and rule. Dirks' (1987) ethnohistorical work on one of the castes of the Mukkulathor advances our understanding. Dirks showcases how British colonial rule led to the collapse of a political culture based on royalty. Royal power was reduced to a 'Hollow Crown', where the symbol of a glorious past amounted to nothing but an object of fetish and the virtues of royalty were performed amongst discontinuities in terms of cultural endowments. Price's work is basically a counter-argument to Dirks, taking an example from the same Mukkulathor clan of the Maravars, who headed the little kingdoms of Sivaganga and Ramnad, she demonstrates the continuation of royal symbols and values under colonial rule. Through literary examples, Price (1996: 25) depicts how honour and status remain preoccupations in Maravar country, and says that these cultural structures of honour and status inform principles of competition and power.

Taking elements from both Dirks and Price, I will show how the modern construction of a highly politicised caste identity by the Mukkulathors adopts elements from royal

symbols and values on one hand, and colonial subjugation as a form of capital (especially in the figure of Muthuramalinga Thevar) on the other. Thevar became popular as the man who challenged the Raja of Ramnad in electoral politics and won, becoming an undisputed icon of the Mukkulathor community. The epiphenomenon of this complex mixture of a golden past and a modern saviour in the form of Muthuramalinga Thevar as a political leader forms the political discourse of the Thevars. Thevar identity thus became associated with symbols of royalty, martial elements, power, patronage, status, defiance and power. One element missing in both Price and Dirks, however, is a consideration of the nature and structure of caste relationships and power, especially in relation to the lower castes. Both scholars were studying and doing fieldwork during the 1980s and 1990s when the locales concerned were rife with atrocities, which also resulted in mass religious conversions by Pallars. The regions dominated by the Kallars and Maravars were actually ‘geographies of violence’. I am, therefore, surprised that Dirks and Price did not directly analyse this. Post-colonial scholarship of those like Dirks, emphasises British colonialism as the primary reason for the intensification of caste in the society and asserts that it resulted in Brahmin supremacy. This argument definitely has validity, though there is evidence that caste was a powerful signifier in pre-Colonial India. It was the influence of caste, afterall, that made Robert De Nobili, an early catholic missionary to Madurai, act, dress and behave like a Brahmin as a necessary precondition to practicing Christianity (Mosse, 2012: 34-35).

Dirks paints a picture that suggests all the caste conflicts in the early twentieth century were ‘caused by caste census’, not least because of the growing attention given to questions of precedence and issues of respect (Dirks, 2011: 239). Though there is no doubt that the census politicised caste in an unprecedented way, one has to also recognize that the British colonial rule, as an unintended consequence, gave the Dalits a partial escape from caste atrocities and the pre-colonial caste system. This is exemplified in the number of petitions sent to the British government demanding civil liberties for the Dalits. Price tries to show the continuity present in terms of cultural structures of power and honour among the little kings through ‘monarchial symbolism’.

She sees these elements as continually present from the pre-colonial to the colonial period and claims that residues of it shape contemporary politics, but she never gives us a picture of existing caste relations as shown through the nature of the power exercised by these feudatories. Understanding how these symbols and discourses feed into contemporary caste dynamics is essential if we are to comprehend the nature of caste in Tamil Nadu today.

Conclusion

Understanding the history of these castes is critical to grounding the current perspectives of Dalit and Thevar politicians and community activists. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that community is in the realm of the political (1991: xxxvii), I contend that colonial attempts at governmentality went into the interpretation of Thevar castes as criminal. This inadvertently created a mytho-history of the castes as fierce warriors and a law-unto-themselves, which has been hallowed in the collective memory of the community through modern forms of political communication. Whilst Thevars were subject to colonial monitoring and surveillance, they had the social capital to reframe this as a badge of honour. Simultaneously, during colonial and post-colonial times, the Pallars were subject to forms of social and political subjugation, especially palpable in their violent conflicts with the Thevars. This has shaped the contemporary understandings of community that circulate among them. Regarding the place of caste status within broader discourses of identity politics and political recognition, the Pallars are continually engaged in processes of contestation and negotiation. Entrenched systems of caste bondage and the related hegemonic control over bodily movement and practices inform the ways in which lower caste members perceive their worth. Their marginal standing is reinforced in Thevar displays of power. The following chapter discusses the Thevar community's quintessential icon around whom their hegemony is constructed.

CHAPTER FOUR:
Traversing the Political and Sacral: The Making of the Iconography of Pasumpon
Muthuramalinga Thevar

*Thedi Thedi Alaiyiren En Deivam Kidaikkalai, Indha Thevar Kulathil Meendum Oru
Deivam Porakkalai.*

[I have been continuously searching but I have not found my God. Another God has not
yet been born for this Thevar community.]

Film Song, *Vaakapatta Seemai* (Land the Bride got Married to).²²

Introduction

On August 27, 2015 in the southern district of Madurai, I was having a discussion with friends when I was alerted to the news that some miscreants had vandalised the Muthuramalinga Thevar statue at Goripalayam. I made my way there to find out what was happening:

The scene was quite intense, with khaki clad men on one side and the protesting Thevars on the other. A huge lorry, an Ashok Leyland, was lying down on the road near the statue. Later, I found out that the speeding lorry heading towards Albert Victor Bridge had rammed into the circular base of the Thevar statue at Goripalayam, but this had been reported as desecration. In the crash, the pedestal of the huge statue got damaged. As I was trying to gather some information from my journalist friends about the incident, the members of Thevar community started arguing with the police that it was a conspiracy to shift the statue, and

²² *Vakkapatta Seemai* (Bandha Pandiyan, 2011) is one among many films which highlight the Thevar subculture and show them as custodians of *maanam* (honour) and *veeram* (valour). For a detailed analysis of such formulaic films (See Karthikeyan and Gorringer, 2017).

there was a ruckus. During the melee, stones were thrown at shops and buses as everyone ran helter-skelter. My journalist friends and I found ourselves safe near the police post. Additional police force and riot-control vehicles reached the spot. Reluctant to disperse, members of various Thevar outfits gathered at the spot demanded that a proper inquiry should be held and claimed that this was a tacit move on the part of the government authorities, who were blaming the traffic and had earlier planned to construct a flyover. While discussions were going on between the police, revenue officials and the Thevar community members I spoke to a member of the All India Forward Bloc on the sidelines.²³ Duraipandi, from nearby Sellur, was protesting and he informed me that this was not just an accident but part of a hidden agenda to remove the Thevar statue. He said, 'Madurai Corporation has been planning to build a flyover on Goripalayam junction but we (Thevar Organisations) opposed the move, stating that the Thevar statue would never be allowed to move even an inch from its current location.' Duraipandi asserted that, to prove that the statue was disturbing traffic flow they had enacted a drama through this lorry-ramming incident, thereby showing the public that the need for a flyover is a real concern and that the Thevar statue should be shifted to a safer place. The community members, unsatisfied with the promises of the officials, started shouting slogans – *Thevar Inathai Vanjikkadhey, Deiva Thirumaganai Seendadhey* (Don't deceive the Thevar community and don't mess with the divine descendant) – and stated that the sinister designs could never be achieved. They asserted that it is not a statue but an idol of the god worshipped by them. As the protests grew louder, the mayor of Madurai Corporation V.V. Rajan Chellappa came to the spot. A member of the community himself, he pacified the crowd and assured them that the Corporation would build a much stronger pedestal and there was no move to relocate the statue. The crowd slowly dispersed and the traffic, which had come to standstill for more than four hours, started to ease and a poclain was used to remove the lorry from the spot (Field Notes, August 2015).

This incident calls for some analysis of the devotion and attachment shown towards Muthuramalinga Thevar. Why is the community so sentimental about the statue that they will even resort to violence to protect its sanctity? Ever since its installation, the Thevar statue has become one of Madurai's iconic landmarks. The massive bronze structure in the middle of a busy intersection has become a significant space where members of the Thevar community showcase their strength during annual events. It has become a site of worship and community gatherings, for protesting and celebrating. It has also become common for political debutants who wish to gain a foothold in southern Tamil Nadu to either garland this statue in Madurai or visit Thevar's memorial in Pasumpon (V.S. Navamani Interview, May 2015, Madurai). In this chapter, I examine the construction of Thevar iconicity by drawing upon primary visual, textual and aural

²³ The All India Forward Bloc is a Thevar dominated political party in Tamil Nadu originally founded by Subash Chandra Bose.

materials. These include photographs, wall posters, billboards, folk-songs, films and film-songs and speeches, mostly in the Tamil language. Icons, as indexes of power and labours of worship, are key signifiers of collective aspirations (Ghosh, 2011: 5). This chapter explores how Thevar as an icon facilitates the articulation of collective aspirations and assumes political agency within given contexts. The Thevar icon, which has become the symbol of Thevars, provides an interesting vantage point from which to understand a community that has gained a powerful status in Tamil Nadu's socio-political and cultural domains.

The main themes of this chapter are the specific role of iconography in the negotiation of public memory, social identity, and larger political assertions. My intention is not to explicate the technological aspects of the iconisation in detail, but to focus on materiality and how the sensorial experiences influence the social landscape, socio-political and cultural realities, and identity formation. According to Ghosh (2011), the location of the icon, the embodied veneration, and the forms of attachment to the icon are key aspects in the making of an icon and its reception and it is necessary to discuss them. Therefore it becomes pertinent to analyse the production, dissemination and reception of Muthuramalinga Thevar as an icon within the social, political and sacral realms. Drawing upon Panofsky's iconographical interpretation, I look at how the interaction between the icon's biographical elements, agents, and audience results in the creation of iconicity. The role of certain portions of Muthuramalinga Thevar's speeches and actions in facilitating the iconic process and how the organisations publicise his achievements will also be examined.

Taking my lead from conversations with the members of the community and various leaders, I will use firsthand observation of the aesthetic context and how images for the various commemoration events are chosen. The theoretical aspects of icons and iconography will be discussed first. This literature will then be located within the existing cultural realm, which is dominated by Dravidian iconography. I will offer a brief history of Muthuramalinga Thevar before delving into how his icon is constructed across different realms, from the political to the cultural. I detail how Thevar is depicted and chart processes of deification and sacralisation, then discuss how the visual and

aural elements of the icon are taken to a wider audience by means of cinema, before reflecting on its public reception and concluding.

Understanding Political and Sacral Icons

According to Binder (2012: 101), icons are images of extraordinary symbolic power and carriers of collective emotions and meanings and these ‘icons’ can be individuals, products or events. Icons occupy a wide range of cultural registers. Conventionally, they are associated with visual emblems – such as statues, sculptures, paintings, and architectural constructions – but Bartmański and Alexander (2011) find that contemporary icons range much more widely and can include popular songs, quintessential consumer products, brands and logos. Alexander (2008: 782) defines the icon as a ‘symbolic condensation’, a thing that inherently embraces within its material form a cultural, moral meaning. To be iconic, an object must be culturally ascendant within particular communities or cultural networks. And iconicity does not merely concern material values but also cultural ones. Bartmański and Alexander highlight that:

Icons allow members of societies to experience a sense of participation in something fundamental whose fuller meaning eludes their comprehension. Icons are cultural constructions that provide believer-friendly epiphanies and customer-friendly images. The icon has proven to be a powerful and resilient culture structure, and a container for sacred meanings (2012: 1-2)

Perceived and encountered as auratic objects, icons demand veneration. The symbolic density of an icon is accumulated through widely circulating images, stories, and heroism-associated myths, for example. Over time, these become intensified and are naturalised as qualities of the icon. Oral histories and depiction through songs, plays, speeches, constructed biographies, legends and gossip add different dimensions to the iconisation process. The icon here is not only a political but also an aesthetic and moral category.

Oleson (2015) argues that the iconic process consists of three core elements: biography, audience and agency. He further explains that iconicity is a decidedly social and

collective construct, formed through interaction between icon and audience. Using the example of Nelson Mandela, Oleson demonstrates that political iconicity is the embodiment of values and ideals cherished by people in a certain period of time where the individual becomes a personae or a symbol. Another example of an important global icon is Che Guevara, who after his death in 1967 became one of the most celebrated figures of the global Left and has become an icon for his political ideals and a symbol of counter culture (Ziff, 2006). Political icons with the stature and revolutionary appeal of Mandela and Che always carry an element of sacrality. Gentile (2006) has asserted that all political systems or concepts including democracies can be sacralised. He stated that veneration and sacralisation have become characteristic of all forms of modern politics due to the need to mobilise the masses. This religious dimension, he says, is not a unique, atypical phenomenon but lies at the heart of modern politics. Gentile describes further how political leaders and institutions being invested with religious symbols marks this process. He calls the accompanying emergence of a 'sacred' or 'mythical' history, which includes the creation of myths and political martyrs, a collective 'sacralisation of a political past' (2006:4).

Studying Icons

Defining iconology as the hermeneutics of the visual, Panofsky (1982) outlines three stages of interpretation, which allow us to decipher images like texts. The first step is the pre-iconographic description of the object. The second step is analysis, and the third step interpretation. These three steps constitute the core of iconology as a method. Eberlein (2008: 179) stresses that Panofsky offers only a theoretical model and for those applying iconography/iconology, the method would be an integrated process with no distinct stages. Three types of visual contexts can be distinguished: (1) the form, or motif of the visual; (2) the production context; and (3) the reception context. Lastly, and most importantly for an iconological interpretation: What information do the studied visuals convey about the social, political, and cultural context in which they were produced and perceived?

Images give visual form to invisible powers and make present what is absent. ‘They speak directly to the senses and affect the psyche’ (Douzinas, 1999: 37). ‘Iconicity’ refers to the mobilising power of objects, images, and events. Icons stir up and trigger strong emotional responses, be they attractive or repulsive, traumatic or triumphant. Sometimes icons split their audiences into those who gather around them as the embodiment of their collective identity, and those for whom the same icons represent a demonic and dangerous threat to their communities (Giehsen, 2012: 247). According to Alexander, iconicity is a process, not an objective fact, and it is subject to powerful social mediation. He says that once mediated, iconic power continues to exist, even if there is an attempt to engage critically. Icons can perform without the apparent aid of other powers because, once launched, they have power independent of the processes that performatively produced them. ‘Once an icon, it can effectively perform its iconicity from a distance—such is its power’ (Alexander, 2012: 34). In the construction of an icon, accounts of critics, contemporaries or political rivals stand as testimonies and when they engage in reverential references it adds to mythicisation (Alexander 2012). When social mediation is done with symbolism and mythology, a form of iconic power is concretised.

Though statues and texts help create an icon, easily accessible elements like images and sounds experienced on a regular basis help to construct iconic power on a larger scale. Image in its broadest sense, includes every visual representation used in the making of an icon. Through regular encounters with images, the potential to develop a deep emotional bond is made possible. A larger ‘world’ is opened up to us and contributes to our personal and collective identity-formation (Sonnevend, 2012: 220). According to Barthes, semiological (or symbolic) interpretation is the search for the visual elements that serve in a given society as signs and symbols. They are historically coded in the practices of a given society (Barthes, 1983: 206). Giehsen (2012: 207) comments upon similar lines that, ‘The sacred items of a particular community like totems, gods, demons, historical or religious events and stories, rulers and other icons of collective identity form the core of symbolic images.’ Images here signify the ‘invisible sacred’, that is the core of the social community, and presenting these images to the community is a performance of its collective identity.

Symbolic value is defined by the identity-inspiring power of the symbols within the respective community. 'Symbolic images are embedded in the familiar symbolic universe of a social community - every member of the respective community is able to understand its language, the narrative is obvious and plain, and the emotional impact is clear' (Giehzen, 2012: 208). Iconography is not only a means of communication, but is also particularly effective as part of the political. Ganguly and Thomas (2014: 2) highlight that the power of visual imagery is even more marked and influential than the written and aural. This focus on community and identity highlights the importance of collective memory and performance in iconography.

Collective Memory and Performance

Collective memory, according to Halbwachs (1992: 22) 'endures and draws its strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember.' He also emphasises that as there are multiple groups and institutions, there are many collective memories. The emphasis on the collective is important for our understanding in this chapter; it is the time-space dynamic that allows groups of individuals to collectively remember a bygone aspect of life. Historical memory is kindled through 'reading, listening or being part of commemorative and festive occasions when people gather together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long departed members of the group' (ibid: 24-25). The role of social institutions is vital here: they store and interpret the past. Halbwach's definition thus points towards memory's symbolic aspects and tangibility in the form of rituals. Commemorations serve to invoke collective memory. Durkheim likewise insisted that, 'collective feelings become fully conscious of themselves *only* by settling upon external tangible objects' (1995: 421).

Historic memory is the collective dimension of individual sense and, as explained by Halbwachs, is more or less a shared network of meaning to which people refer when they try to make sense of a situation, a social action, or an object. The representations

are mediated through organisations such as public media, rituals, images and symbols. The emphasis on these representations takes us to the question of performance. Boehm (2012: 6) explains that ‘the physical presence of images allows repeated performance; we can return to see them and thus be reminded of all the meanings with which they are associated. At once stable and portable, images look back at us, and in doing so shed light on the meaning of absence.’ In other words, the visible icon and the unseen associations constitute each other through endless performative feedback. Images not only carry certain specified meanings but also have hidden denotations, which can be contextually comprehended through performative aspects of the social and political. Similarly, Holt (2004) states that apart from being a distillation of collective values, icons carry a special performative power.

Collective memories are constructed with particular emphasis on the role of sites and symbols. These provide a homogenising effect where connections can be forged between different groups at a particular time in remembering the past. This forming of a homogenising identity is part of what Anderson (1998: 29) calls ‘unbound serialities’:

Unbound serialities are typically imagined and narrated by means of the classic instruments of print-capitalism, namely, the newspaper and the novel. They afford the opportunity for individuals to imagine themselves as members of larger than face-to-face solidarities, of choosing to act on behalf of those solidarities.

Commemorative events to observe fallen heroes and memorialising the sacrifices of community elders or tragic events from the past through symbols like statues and cenotaphs are the most commonly observed practices. Ritual performances, which rely heavily on symbols, play an important role in creating and preserving memories as part of such commemorations, and drive broader social outcomes such as solidarity and coordinated political action (Collins, 2005).

Bartmański argues that the details about an event recede in collective memory faster than in individual minds directly connected to it. Strong iconic entities derive cultural power from their unique symbolic properties and place-specific meanings (Bartmański, 2012: 60). Binder notes how Alexander’s (2008) model of ‘iconic experience’

emphasises the link between visual textures and the cultural text of social life (Binder, 2012: 103). This encourages us to look beyond the iconic object to grasp the cultural and moral meanings with which they are imbued. In this process, the intentions of producers of icons are important areas of analysis, but the reception of icons also requires understanding (Ganguly and Thomas, 2011: 3). Erecting statues, making portraits and building shrines and related edifices of liturgical importance are collective acts of commemoration (Schwartz, 1991). Statues talk about the past, the life, legacy and sacrifices of an individual. As fixed elements, they embody memory more than the other ritual artefacts in the modern political context. In the Indian context, colonial socio-political practices saw the creation of an iconic society, where the proliferation of visual images, due to mechanical reproduction, made them readily accessible. Given the prevalence and proliferation of visual images, Levin (1988; 1993) argues that a 'hegemony of vision' has dominated modern consciousness. He emphasises that we should challenge this hegemony given that aurality and replication of sounds remain essential parts of everyday life. The unique feature of modernity has been considered as neither the dominance of vision or sound but the reproducibility of information in infinite ways (see Mitter 2002; Benjamin, 1970: 219-53). Bartmański and Alexander (2012: 6) also highlight the mediation of icons by interpretive power. To grasp this better, we turn to how visual and aural cultures dominate the landscapes of the research context.

Dravidian Iconography and Commemorative Symbolism

In modern South Asia, icons within the universe of Hindu liturgical practice are still resonant as sacral objects. They function as arbitrators that enable participation in a sacral economy, rousing people to celebration and violence (Ghosh, 2011: 82). In terms of iconicity, Binder (2012) sees visuality and sacredness as fused through ritual. Jain (2007), likewise, informs us that ritual worship makes something divine and notes how the labour of worship turns an icon into a sacral icon. She talks about how a clay deity or calendar art is transformed through performative rituals into an object of devotion. Hegemonic institutions undertake the deliberate and controlled labour of auratisation

through symbolic means. These include mounting statues and memorials or consecrating art, flags, and buildings and rendering them sites of pilgrimage.

In the Tamil context, Pandian (1992) illustrates how a political icon is sacralised through ritual consecration. In his study of M.G.Ramachandran (matinee idol and Chief Minister), he shows how subaltern followers invested him with divinity and magical powers and built shrines to him even while he was alive. Such practices, Pandian observes, have ‘a long tradition in Indian politics’ (1992: 139). According to Nandy (2001: 126), deities in everyday Hinduism are very much part of our own selves and function from within us. Fuller (1992: 31) supplements that there is no sharp separation between a sacred realm inhabited by gods and a mundane one of men, for popular Hinduism is ‘premised on the lack of any absolute divide between them’. A God looks back at you when you commit yourself and catch a glimpse of the icon. The God will provide *darshan* (Sighting of the Deity) (Eck, 1985) and will eventually show you *karisanam* (Sympathy).

Tamil Nadu witnessed a proliferation of a new visual culture in the post-independence era, which can be seen through the lens of Schwartz’s (2010: 620) ‘commemorative symbolism’, which includes eulogy and ritual oratory, monuments, shrines, relics, statues, paintings, and ritual observances. Commemoration marked DMK’s political discourse; the world of epics, politics and cinema merged together and ancient literary sources became part of everyday political references. It helped produce a new sense of community experience; a series of calendrical events to commemorate the past heroes and martyrs as part of a spatio-temporal exercise hinged upon specific locations. This became the quintessential feature of Tamil politics. According to Rajadurai and Geetha (1996), essential Tamilness mediated by *Maanam* (Honour) and *Veeram* (Valour) characterised the political communication of DMK, which emerged as a vanguard movement of the Tamil cause in the 1950s and 60s. The DMK during its time in power (1967-76) changed the Tamil landscape with its visible iconography, which ranged from street names to erecting statues for literary icons. Dravidian aesthetics, especially its propaganda culture, became unique in Indian politics with its posters, cutouts and

flexboards (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1996; Jacob, 2007; Vaasanthi, 2008; Gerritsen, 2013). This investment in the visual/aural economy gave the DMK a hegemonic presence. Dravidian aesthetics centred on iconography. Bate comments that, ‘the logic of the political practices partakes of the same logic that informs religious practices associated with the worship of God’ (2009: 136). Here, Gods, politicians and filmstars reside in an ethical realm different from that of ordinary human beings. People relate to powerful leaders like they relate to deities.

Cult figures, hero-worship and a ‘politics of adulation’ became the trademarks of Dravidian politics and public space is packed with dense signifiers of a cult-driven political culture centered on visual image (see Hardgrave, 1976; Pandian, 1992; Dickey, 1993; Rajadurai & Geetha, 1996; Ramasamy, 2011; Bate, 2009; Gerritsen, 2014). Films are a crucial visual medium and have been an integral part of the modern social and political life in Tamil Nadu. As a quintessential part of the film industry, and an everyday feature, songs are ever-present in the Tamil country. Cultural critic Baskaran (1991) says that a strong, and understudied, aural tradition exists in Tamil Nadu, with the creation of songs propagating social and political ideas. Film songs that carry the rhetoric of valour and honour are always major hits. Another interesting aspect is the celebration of Tamil/Dravidian culture through various idioms that characterise their martial prowess. It is here that Thevars, idealised as the warrior clan, forcefully entered the realm of popular culture and became a significant part of the Dravidian narrative as celebrated patrons, kings, and brave warriors. Numerous films with historical characters added to the myth that the Thevars were the rulers of the Tamil land²⁴ (Karthikeyan and Gorringer 2017). This construction is important for our understanding as we proceed in later parts of the chapter to explore songs that emphasise the iconicity of Muthuramalinga Thevar.

²⁴ The famous song from Thevar Magan *Potri Paadadi Pennae Thevar Kaaladi Mannae*, (O Girl Sing a Song Praising the Foot printed soil of Thevar) has lines which say: The Royal Clan which ruled the Southern State. This song is the anthem for the Thevars and is a must in any event of theirs and will be played on loudspeakers.

The Life and Times of Muthuramalinga Thevar

The icon discussed here presents an interesting case study. Though he opposed atheism and Dravidian forms of assertion, he now stands as a figure iconised by Dravidian parties. U. Muthuramalinga Thevar was born on 30 October 1908 in Pasumpon village, in Ramnad, which was then part of the composite Madurai district. His first brush with politics came when he met Srinivasa Iyengar, a congressman and a leading lawyer from Madras in 1927. As a youngster, he had seen how his fellow caste members, the Aappanadu Maravars, were affected by the CTA and started to mobilise people against it. During the 1930s he organised conventions in Ramnad demanding that the CTA should be revoked. Thevar successfully stood for the Mudhukulathur Board Elections in 1936 and in the following year, he was elected to the Congress of the provincial government as a representative for the Ramanathapuram constituency, defeating the Justice Party candidate, the Raja of Ramnad.²⁵ During the late 1930s, Thevar became active in trade union affairs in Madurai. Murphy (1980) tells us that he wielded a lot of influence among the Marava mill workers. Following a major strike at the Mahalakshmi Mills demanding the reinstatement of a section of rusticated workers, Thevar was jailed for seven months in October 1938 (Murphy, 1980; Perumal, 1993). His arrest was discussed during the Assembly session on 7 December 1938 and this arrest, coupled with the state's fears about him, elevated his stature as a leader among the Thevars (*Times of India*, December, 8, 1938).

In March 1939, Thevar met Subash Chandra Bose while attending the Tripuri Congress Session. Bose, who was humbled at the meeting, quit Congress and formed the Forward Bloc (FB) and Thevar, as an ardent supporter of Bose, became his lieutenant in the Madras Presidency. After the formation of the FB, Bose visited Madurai in September 1939 and was accorded a good reception. During this period, Thevar became embroiled

²⁵ The Justice Party was originally known as the South Indian Liberal Federation in the former Madras Presidency. It was established in 1916 by mostly non-Brahmin upper-caste men who came together to check the hegemony of the Brahmins who were disproportionately represented in the bureaucracy. The Justice Party enjoyed power in the Dyarchy system and brought in Communal Representation. It declined in the 1940s and transformed into Dravidar Kazhagam (Irschick 1969).

in many controversies, was repeatedly jailed, including for his involvement in criminal cases, and was legally prevented from visiting Pasumpon village. According to Dinakaran (1958), Thevar was a figure that everyone feared in the Ramnad region. He was functioning as an extra-judicial authority. Criminal cases were filed against him in various incidents where government officials were attacked. Following such cases, he moved to Madurai for some time. However, even there he was sentenced to 18 months rigorous imprisonment under the Defense of India rules for violating the order restricting his movements within Madurai (*Times of India*, 26 Sept 1940).

In 1946, Thevar was elected as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Mudukulathur constituency unopposed. According to Perumal (1993: 118-124), despite this election, Thevar abstained from political activity and confined himself to his Pulichakulam bungalow estate as part of a spiritual journey. Standing in the first elections in independent India in 1952, for both the Lok Sabha (Lower House) of Indian Parliament for Aruppukottai constituency, and the Assembly for Mudukulathur constituency, he won both seats comfortably. He resigned as a Member of Parliament (MP) and kept the Assembly seat (Perumal, 1993: 245). He repeated the feat in 1957 winning Aruppukottai MP seat and Mudukulathur MLA seat but he vacated the latter and a by-election was held and during this time animosity grew between the FB and Muthuramalinga Thevar-supporting Maravars on one side, and the Pallars who were with Congress, on the other. This escalated into violence in most parts of Mudukulathur and a peace committee meeting was held to ease the situation. At the meeting, Thevar had a confrontation with a young Pallar Congressman, Immanuel. Feeling humiliated, Thevar left the meeting halfway and the next day, on 11 September 1957, Immanuel was murdered in Paramakudi town. This sparked the Mudukulathur Riots, large-scale violence in which close to 50 people died, scores were injured and lots of property damaged. Thevar was arrested in connection with the case and only acquitted after a two-year trial. He became less active in politics after his release and ill health meant that he stayed indoors at his residence. He claimed that he was a victim of a Congress conspiracy to ostracise him as a caste leader. He passed away on 29 October 1963 and was cremated the next day at his village in Pasumpon (Perumal, 1993; Sakthimohan,

1995; Vellaichamy Thevar, 2007; Andiappa Thevar, 1993).

Between the 1930s and his death, Muthuramalinga Thevar was the preeminent leader of the Thevars and his influence was strong in Ramanathapuram and parts of Madurai. The Thevars were the dominant caste in these places and the FB emerged as their party. Hardgrave's account (1969) describes Thevar's power in Ramnad district and his use of intimidation to win seats: 'The Harijan Pallars, dependent on the Maravars and terrorised by Muthuramalinga's band of rowdies, voted for the Forward Bloc out of fear of reprisal' (1969: 223-4). During the 1950s and early 1960s, Congress was the single largest party; the party leader and then Chief Minister, Kamaraj lacked support only among the Thevars (Barnett, 1976: 91). That the Thevars remained a separate political entity, standing apart from Congress and the rising Dravidian collective, indicates Thevar's influence. With the collapse of Congress' hegemony in the 1960s, the rise of DMK in the Tamil political scene saw commemorative symbolism emerge as central to political culture. As a strong anti-Congress representative, Thevar's imagery was much needed for the DMK to make inroads into the Thevar belt. There may have been fewer Thevars than Dalits, but the former were more politically influential and it was Muthuramalinga Thevar's political acumen that saw them stand together as an electoral group.

After the demise of Thevar; members of the community became even more powerful as they gained prominent positions in the Dravidian parties. They were impossible to ignore. V.S. Navamani, a writer and historian from the Thevar community, believes that the DMK capitalised on the arrest of Thevar by the Congress government and the antipathy towards Congress after his death in 1963. The campaign began with Thevar's funeral in Pasumpon. Speeches of DMK members in public meetings emphasised how Congress had humiliated the 'Lion of the South'. 'This expression of solidarity helped the DMK to gain a foothold in the southern districts, the Communists who really voiced support for Muthuramalinga Thevar during the Mudukulathur riots and arrest did not gain any benefit' (Interview with V.S. Navamani Madurai, May 2015).

Muthuramalinga Thevar remains a controversial figure associated with the extreme Hindu right views of Veer Savarkar (a politician and Hindu activist) and M.S. Golwalkar (an ideologue of the Hindu Organisation). In Madurai, he met with the latter, giving him *Pana Mudippu* (a purse of collected money) and spoke against Gandhi as an enemy of Hinduism due to his support for the Harijans (*Indian Express*, 31 October 1957). His official biography also records how he presided over a meeting in which Veer Savarkar spoke (Perumal 1993: 36-37). He had stepped in after the planned chairperson did not wish to risk imprisonment as an extremist following a fiery speech given by Savarkar on the previous day. Muthuramalinga Thevar was a willing replacement and supported Savarkar's extremist position, stating that he was ready to face any consequences. Savarkar dubbed him *Thennattu Thilagar* (Bal Gangadhar Tilak of the South) in response.²⁶ Various critical accounts of Thevar depict him as a symbol of casteism and as an authoritarian and intimidating force in the Thevar regions (Dinakaran, 1958; Chokkalingam, 1957). The Madurai Sessions Court Judgement dated 9 September 1940, which sentenced Muthuramalinga Thevar to imprisonment, carries the list of criminal charges against him prepared by Court Officer S.P. Thomson. It states that he was a habitual offender²⁷ and that he wielded great influence among the Ramanathapuram Zilla Thevars and was the Hindu Mahasabha leader of the region (Judgement Copy Criminal Case Appeal 89/1940). Most of my Thevar interlocutors perceive these charges as the result of Congress plotting in response to Muthuramalinga Thevar being a sympathiser of Bose and a radical rather than a moderate.

Muthuramalinga Thevar as a Political Icon

For the Thevar community, Muthuramalinga Thevar is a prototype who stands as a defining marker of Thevar assertion and dominance. Each year on his birth anniversary, close to two lakh people gather to worship and pay homage, exemplifying his status as

²⁶ Muthuramalinga Thevar's house, which has been turned into a memorial features a huge portrait of Veer Savarkar.

²⁷ Some accounts of that time claim that he was a habitual offender and lived a life threatening people in the local community (Chokkalingam, 1957, Dinakaran, 1958). Thevar writers contest these accounts as a conspiracy by the Congress to defame Thevar and portray him as a casteist (Sasivarna Thevar, 1960, Perumal, 1993).

an icon of the community. In the introduction we saw how the news of his statue being desecrated brought Madurai city to a standstill and how he and his statues are venerated as sacral entities. These depictions of him in important places become rallying points (Pandian, 2000; Mines, 2002). As an icon, he enables the recognition of the collective aspirations of the Thevar community, which has seen visible transformations in the last three decades. Mines (2002) informs us that land tenure reforms and the migration of land-holding communities in the southern districts to big cities led to more Thevars owning land. This, coupled with the assertion that they were the erstwhile rulers of the little kingdoms, helped them construct their dominance. According to Mines, 'Muthuramalinga Thevar remains a figure of identity formation for Thevars all over Southern Tamil Nadu, as statues to him are erected in public places over which Thevars assert hegemony' (2002: 66).

Thevars who sensed the power in monumental imagery in public space, used the shifting of political power to their hands during this time to carve out their space in the public sphere. Though symbolism around Muthuramalinga Thevar and Thevar identity took various forms, statues were the most prominent. Statues of Thevar were erected even when he was alive. The first statue was unveiled at Karukkathanpatti near Usilampatti by the villagers and then at Sengulam near Tirumangalam in the year 1959. Another went up in 1962, when he was unwell and confined to his home. The residents of Kalloorani near Thiruppachethi made a further statue, which was unveiled after his death in 1963 (Interview with V.S. Navamani, May 2015). Muthuramalinga Thevar came to be a sacral figure, complete with constructed stories about his spiritual life and the act of erecting statues grew to showcase devotion to him. The statues also gain a deified sanctity as they are garlanded regularly and occasionally cleansed with pots of milk and rituals are performed. Initially this occurred on a small local scale, but Dravidian parties took the iconisation of Thevar to another level, renaming public buildings, markets and bus stands in southern districts. Elsewhere these were named after Dravidian party founders and leaders, but in the southern districts Thevar became the prominent icon. He, along with the former Chief Minister Kamaraj and B.R. Ambedkar are among the major figures who occupy the visual landscape.

The Thevars were mobilised as a caste group and remained with the FB in significant numbers, making them a decisive factor in electoral politics. This politicisation, or the act of functioning as a political group, made the Thevars a target for the DMK, which was aiming to wrest power from Congress. The iconisation of Muthuramalinga Thevar was seen as one way to achieve this. During the 1970s and early 80s, Muthuramalinga Thevar was an icon and undisputed representative of the Thevar community, but he was also being constructed in opposition to earlier historical icons, such as Pulithevar.²⁸ The competition between DMK and AIADMK from the mid-1970s onwards fuelled the process. In 1974, the DMK government under Karunanidhi unveiled the large Thevar statue in Madurai. The inauguration of the 15.5-foot Goripalayam statue, possibly the largest statue in Tamil Nadu, on 5th January 1974 was held with great pomp.²⁹ The then President of India, V.V. Giri unveiled the statue in the presence of then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi. The legend, as propounded by the Thevars, is that the Goripalayam intersection was chosen as it was where the Congress government arrested Muthuramalinga Thevar in connection with Immanuel's murder. According to V.S. Navamani, the late Member of Parliament and disciple of Muthuramalinga Thevar, P.K. Mookaiah Thevar and elders from the Thevar community chose the location. This was a conscious decision to make sure that Muthuramalinga Thevar's arrest and the Congress government's effort to defame him is never forgotten (Interview, May 2015).³⁰ Alongside the statue, the DMK also helped to establish three colleges in his name in the Thevar strongholds of Usilampatti, Kamudhi and Mela Neelidhanallur in southern Tamil Nadu (*The Hindu*, 2006). In doing so they were able to make inroads in these areas and the influence of the FB, which historically had more than one representative in the state Assembly, was reduced.

Various competitive efforts to woo Thevar votes were employed through different forms of symbolism, but using Muthuramalinga Thevar presented the most effective choice.

²⁸ Pulithevar was a poligar from the Marava confederacy of Nerkattumseval in Tirunelveli and was a strong opponent of the British Rule during the 1750s.

²⁹ *Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Silai Thirappu Vizha Malar* (Souvenir for the inauguration of Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar statue).

³⁰ *Sirpi Sampath* (Sculptor Sampath) *Silai Vaditha Kathai* (Story on How the Statue was Sculpted).

Under MGR's regime (1977-1987), Muthuramalinga Thevar's birthday became a government event, his portrait was unveiled in the Legislative Assembly, and an Order that Muthuramalinga Thevar's portrait should be hung in all government offices alongside portraits of other national leaders was passed. A biographical note on Muthuramalinga Thevar was introduced into school textbooks. MGR named a district after him in 1984 - *Pasumpon Muthuramalingam* district – but this revealed the power of the Thevar community and their veneration of their iconic leader. Rather than celebrating this as a victory, community members objected that MGR had omitted the term 'Thevar'.³¹ Sensing an opportunity to capitalise and gain Thevar votes in 1989, Karunanidhi renamed the district *Pasumpon Thevar Thirumaganar Mavattam* (Respectful Descendant Pasumpon Thevar District), but this was objected to on the grounds that it did not include his real name. In 1991, when Jayalalitha became Chief Minister, it was finally renamed *Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Mavattam* (Perumal, 1993).

Figure 1. Advertisement in Dinamalar the Tamil newspaper announcing the official inauguration of Pasumpon Muthuramalingam District in Sivaganga on July 17, 1984. The author took all the photos in this thesis unless otherwise stated.

These deliberate interventions through official forms were highly symbolic in nature and served to ratify Thevar caste pride in the official domain. A key example of political symbolism came when Jayalalithaa as Chief Minister in 2014 adorned the Pasumpon statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar with 13 kilograms of golden armour worth 4 crore rupees (420,000 GBP). The loaded gesture was intended to appease the Thevars, who had traditionally backed AIADMK since the days of MGR, before the 2014 elections (Mayilvaganan, 2014). This veneration of a sacralised statue by Jayalalithaa highlights the contradictions involved in the Dravidian adoption of Thevar. Muthuramalinga Thevar, who propagated that *Desiyam Udal Deiveegam Uyir* (Nationalism as body and spirituality as life), was a very religious person. Despite this, none of the Dravidian parties, which are aligned to atheism, or leaders of other political parties can afford to avoid his legacy. He thus belongs to a category of icons that are used for various material purposes and he remains a signifier that can be constantly adapted to suit different needs.



Figure 2. The statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar at Goripalayam in Madurai gets painted for his GP Celebrations, held annually on 30th October. Photo: K. Manikandan©.

Muthuramalinga Thevar, as a powerful icon functions as the mediating entity guaranteeing the Thevars' political and administrative grip over the other castes. As a dominant caste, they wield great influence through both muscle and money power

among other castes, particularly in relation to the Dalits (until they consolidated as a caste group in the mid-1990s). Their grip can be seen in their ability to gain auctioning rights and their acquisition of key political posts in all the major parties. For example, while speaking at the Madakottai Subbu³² anniversary meeting, former Dalit MLA Murugavel Rajan stated that:

I respect the way the Thevars use Muthuramalinga Thevar's image to acquire certain privileges and as an entry point to gain administrative and political favours. A photo of Thevar visibly put up in the see-through white shirt pocket is enough for them to get auction rights for shops, cycle and two wheeler parking stands in bus stands and quarrying rights (Field Notes, 13, September 2014).

Murugavel Rajan, who represented the Pattali Makkal Katchi as an MLA, was referring to the general situation prevailing in southern Tamil Nadu and how the Thevars as a community have become powerful within both ruling and opposition parties. Over the last few decades they have been resisting any attempts by Dalits to get those auction rights and their due in common property resources.³³ In terms of symbolism, a more aggressive visual and aural culture exists in southern regions than the rest of the state.³⁴ The Thevars use aesthetics to create and propagate a martial and glorious Tamil past and claim that they played a vital role as kings, chieftains and patrons of art and architecture. This provides them with a sense of cultural capital. The Thevars, largely irrespective of clan differences, are committed to Muthuramalinga Thevar symbolism and use his portraits on display at houses and business establishments. I see two important aspects to this visual spectacle. At the collective level, the elaborate Thevar iconography creates a sense of identity by providing a set of symbols for community aspirations. However, the greater effect of this lies at the level of the individual psyche where a naturalised moral edge is provided that allows the domination of others in the social realm. This also allows Thevars to replicate the earlier model of the patron-client relationship in which

³² Subbu of Madakottai village in Sivaganga district, was a Marxist Leninist activist from the Pallar community who fought against the caste dominance of local Thevars and was murdered in 1994. Every year his anniversary is observed by various Dalit parties and ML organisations.

³³ Some of the most brutal murders of Dalits by the Thevar community in Madurai and other southern districts were in response to Dalit attempts to claim auctioning rights and become part of grassroots governance. The Melavalavu murders, Sennagarampatti double murder and the murder of Vanjinagaram Kandan are a few examples (Rajangam, 2011).

³⁴ For more on visual culture in Madurai see Kohli, 1990; Karthikeyan, 2011b, 2013; Gerritsen, 2014.

they imagine themselves as patrons.³⁵



Figure 3. At the Pasumpon Memorial, a Thevar youth wears a t-shirt imprinted with the Madurai Thevar statue. The statement reads: ‘Get acquainted and you will know what affection is, but if you pick a fight, you will get to know what bravery is’.

The ubiquity of Thevar iconography in public spaces reflects the notion that the image itself often holds power. An expansive material culture helps in the construction and circulation of his iconicity. The iteration of images, polished, mystified, deified and reposed, has made Muthuramalinga Thevar an everyday icon. Symbolically dense images of Muthuramalinga Thevar circulate in various forms: images are tucked inside pockets but still visible through the white shirts of FB office holders, small pendants hang around the necks of Thevar youths, and tattoos feature on the chests of Thevar men. Larger deified depictions adorn prayer rooms and even larger billboards are erected during marriages, ear piercing events and other ceremonies. Thevar, as an image, is impossible to avoid by one who travels the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. In the recent past, Thevar as an icon has moved into the virtual domain through social media. A macro level analysis of this proliferation and veneration will help us to understand its role in inducing both collective action and collective memory. The spatio-

³⁵ Two of the most common slogans found in the Thevar rhetoric are ‘Every community should live prosperously but only the Mukkulathors should rule’ and; ‘The clan which ruled will never submit’.

temporality of this process of iconisation, initiated by the Thevars through the proliferation of statues and busts and escalated by political parties, is crucial to our understanding. It explains how a localised icon becomes an all-important political icon over a period of time. An icon, in sum, must be constructed.

The Iconic Construction of Muthuramalinga Thevar

There are two strong images of Muthuramalinga Thevar that have been, and continue to be, constructed. First, is the image of the *Desiya Thalaivar* (Nationalistic Leader) and second, the *Deiva Thirumagan* (Divine Descendant). This positioning between the political and sacral is a recurring theme in the construction of his icon. All the sections of the community and its different clans identify with these two representations but they signify them differently. Iconic objects emit potential meanings and experiences, often by design. For example, the size of the Thevar statue, and the choice to depict Gandhi with a charkha and Ambedkar carrying the constitution each symbolise a different meaning and aid iconic construction. The accordance of greatness by contemporaries or critics is also an important feature in iconic construction. In Muthuramalinga Thevar's case, iconic consciousness has reflected the tendency for reification. I find that his iconicity is tightly intertwined with mythical narratives; it draws on a cache of religiously inclined myths and powerful cultural stories laced with martial and heroic elements to elevate and legitimise his status. His image, while simultaneously drawing on religion, provides tangible expression to archetypes, narratives, and coded symbols of important cultural myths related to the moral sanctity of the nation. This is defined by the fact that *Desiyam* (nationalism) and *Deiveegam* (spirituality) form the central mythical elements around which the iconicity of Muthuramalinga Thevar is constructed.

We can analyse the language used by contemporaries such as the former Chief Minister of Madras Presidency, C. Rajagopalachari and political adversaries like Periyar (Great One) E.V. Ramasamy, to describe the icon and, thus, map the terrain of vocabularies of iconic engagement. Periyar, the iconoclast was not an exception when it came to engaging with Muthuramalinga Thevar; the world called him 'Periyar', yet he addressed Muthuramalinga Thevar as such. In a message to Mookaiah Thevar, he wrote:

Friend Mookaiah Thevar, following the footsteps of the most reputed Periyar Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar has done a lot of good for the uplift of backward class people. He is also running a big college in the name of Periyar Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar to benefit the downtrodden (Mookaiah Thevar Golden Jubilee Souvenir, April 1972).

Periyar, who espoused rationalism and atheism, deliberately softened his position when it came to critiquing Muthuramalinga Thevar.³⁶ This is quite surprising, as Periyar did not enter institutional politics and thus had no vote bank compulsions to maintain. This endorsement of Muthuramalinga Thevar by Periyar is seen to carry a lot of value, as it suggested that he received praise even from his adversaries.

Another important political figure, the DMK chief Karunanidhi, despite claiming that he was an atheist and believed in rationalism, while writing about Muthuramalinga Thevar states,

As a majority community in the Southern territorial zone, as a backward community among who a few were listed as Criminal Tribes and for all these people there was a sole leader, who came around as a living god, he is none other than our Muthuramalinga Thevar, there was a time when just a mention of his name would strike nightmare in the hearts of the dominant people (Golden Jubilee Souvenir of Mookaiah Thevar, April 1972).

Examining Thevar in the eyes of his contemporaries and critics allows us to consider the historical construction of an icon through discursive and visible layering. The iconic qualities are part of the larger political context where meaning and sense-making processes are drawn upon (Holt, 2004). Furthermore, icons are believed to have influence outside their immediate cultural sphere, and compel political movements or the state to engage with them. In the case of Muthuramalinga Thevar, the state government has informally sanctioned Muthuramalinga Thevar's memorial to be turned into a temple - called *Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Thirukkoil*. By placing a statue in a seated meditating pose adorned with golden armour it has become a legitimate temple space and every year representatives of the state government present themselves at the ritual, thus confirming the mythical construction that he is a sacred

³⁶ Periyar did demand the arrest of Muthuramalinga Thevar during the 1957 riots following the murder of Immanuel Sekaran. However, there was never a sustained effort to criticize Thevar's politics, which bordered on the Hindu Right (E.V.R. Backs Kamaraj, *Mail*, 27 October 1957).

entity (Pasumpon Thevar GP Souvenir, October 2014).

Identifying iconic processes can be difficult; the key task is to identify and uncover significant moments, events, and actions in the processes and to locate them in their political context. Such an approach necessarily involves some reduction and selection. Following this model, I discern some key moments in the iconisation process: representing the cause of the Thevars affected by the CT Act; his association with Bose and the FB; his victory in the Provincial election in 1937 defeating the powerful Raja of Ramnad; maintaining an autonomous political domain in Thevar-dominated areas despite Congress hegemony; and his arrest in the Immanuel murder case (Perumal, 1993). Muthuramalinga Thevar's incarceration is also mythicised; statistical details – such as, Thevar lived 20,075 days out of which 4,000 were spent in jail – are highlighted as part of the freedom struggle discourse. Muthuramalinga Thevar was a prominent figure among the community at the time of his arrest in 1957, but he had nowhere near the iconic and popular status that he would posthumously achieve (Natarajan Special Issue for Thevar Centenary, *Puthiya Paarvai*, 2007; Vellaichamy Thevar 2007).

The celebrations around the centenary of Muthuramalinga Thevar's birth propelled him into a new, popularised iconic phase. Celebrated as GP, it is a classic example of the power of commemorative symbolism. Oleson's (2015) theoretical model informs us that icon formation occurs in the interplay between the empirical background, the person's biography, agents, and audience. Biographical elements are developed and dramatised by political agents, but for the icon to develop on a larger scale this work should resonate with a wider audience who accept the icon as embodying certain core values. The available visual, textual and oral narratives on Muthuramalinga Thevar were tailored to suit these requirements. As we have seen already, Muthuramalinga Thevar was largely the 'product' of the political contestations based on competitive populist measures. He now stands as the most important political entity in Tamil context. The climatic period of the iconisation process was characterised by an expansion into popular culture, which created a wider sense of acceptance. During this period, from approximately 1990 to 1999, the Muthuramalinga Thevar icon was strengthened and enlarged through its correspondence with the state. The symbolic resources (statues,

visuals, memorial) and remembrance patterns (GPs, biography, songs) conditioned this process. In the following pages we shall look at the iconographic pattern, followed by the sacralisation of the icon. A certain seriality in the production of imagery exists, however, and to understand this phenomenon requires an analysis of the iconographic pattern, which is discussed next.

The Iconographic Pattern

The Thevars have taken symbols and motifs from ancient Tamil society and merged them with new imagery to fit their contemporary setting. One of the main tropes is to present Thevar as part of a long history of leadership and kingly power. An invented iconic seriality begins with the medieval emperor Raja Raja Cholan and ends with Muthuramalinga Thevar; between these figures there is argued to be a thousand years of continuity in martial tradition and royal lineage. The set of images that occupy the Mukkulathor oeuvre are what I call formulaic portraits; their function is to evoke the martial pride of the Thevars in a continuum with a past as rulers and an anticipated future as rulers again. This is not just a combination of ancient and modern imagery but a conscious effort to instill the idea that a ruling clan should rule again. Thevar's image suggests plainness, nationalism, pride, spirituality, and locality for the Thevars, but in the eyes of others and particularly Dalits it represents Thevar authority and dominance.

V.S. Navamani recounts that in 1963, following the death of Muthuramalinga Thevar; a calendar was designed for the first time showing Thevar standing on a lotus with small icons of Bose and Lord Murugan on the top left and right corners. This was possibly the first calendar art produced in Tamil Nadu to carry an image of a leader as a prophetic symbol. It has now become common to see miniature statues and calendar art images of Muthuramalinga Thevar framed and kept alongside portraits of Gods in domestic space. The use of a pantheon of images under the umbrella of Thevar iconography started with the decision to celebrate the Marudhu Pandiars (late 18th century brothers from the Sivaganga Estate who fought against the British) in 1987. Navamani opined that the decision to celebrate the Marudhu brothers, given the rivalry within the Sivaganga

Zamindari, resulted in the decision to celebrate Velu Nachiar's birthday.³⁷ The AIADMK regime unveiled a statue of Velu Nachiar at the entrance of the Sivaganga Palace. The Ramnad Zamindari followed suit and decided to celebrate Rebel Muthuramalinga Sethupathy, the king of Ramanathapuram. The Kondayankottai Maravars in Tirunelveli went ahead and started celebrating Pulithevar and his statue and memorial was officially inaugurated in 1998 by the DMK government. Navamani commented, 'Now there are new heroes being invented, and it is an unhealthy trend and all this is supported by vested interests who want to reduce the importance of Thevar by supporting these parallel iconisations' (Interview with V.S. Navamani, 2015). Notwithstanding Navamani's accusation about parallel icons, these efforts emerge from, and culminated in, a 'Thevar iconography' exemplified in the image below (figure 4).



Figure 4. A poster on the occasion of Pulithevar's 300th birth anniversary at Nerkattumseval in Tirunelveli district.

The poster signals that the Thevars belong to the Chera Chola and Pandya dynasties. The iconography shows Raja Raja Cholan's bronze figurine, Lord Murugan's image,

³⁷ Velu Nachiar was the queen of Sivaganga Estate from 1760-1790 and was one of the earliest to fight against the British Colonial rule. She is dubbed as the *Veeramangai* (Brave Woman)

Velu Nachiar Sivaganga Queen, Subash Bose saluting in his military garb, Muthuramalinga Thevar, Pulithevan's silver coated statue and the almost hidden figure of the Marudhu Brothers. At the top of the poster you can see the words *Thevar Thunai* (Let Thevar Be With Us). According to Hindu beliefs, for any event to be successful, the mercy of the deity is important and either writing the deity's name or mentioning the deity in prayers is common. The accounts given by Navamani, and the DMK and AIADMK government's efforts indicate that commemorating historical figures to appease a particular caste started in the late 1980s. Muthuramalinga Thevar juxtaposed with Bose is also a common feature in the iconography. This not only signifies that Muthuramalinga Thevar was his Tamil lieutenant, but also provides them with visual capital by implying martial prowess at an international level through an allusion to Bose's formation of the Indian National Army to fight the British (Srinivas & Kaali, 2002).

Different groups use varied images and iconographies to suit their own needs. For example, Thevar is shown as a clean-shaven spiritualist, sporting sacred ash on the forehead in a yellow shawl and white *veshti*. The spotless white *veshti* symbolises purity and caste power. The shawl evokes auspiciousness and is the chosen colour of the Thevar community. The position of the shawl is important and connotes caste power. Traditionally, the lower castes were not allowed to cover their upper bodies or to wrap shawls around their shoulders, as these were practices largely associated with upper and dominant castes. The lower castes have to remove their shawls and tie them around their waists in the presence of upper-castes as a mark of respect (see Gorringer & Rafanell, 2007). As per the Hindu tradition, in front of the deity people generally tie their shawls around their waist too.

Conspicuously absent from this image is a moustache which, in the Tamil context, is the archetypal symbol of the Thevars' martial prowess (Karthikeyan, 2016). The absence of the moustache in his images has been explained in various narratives; Navamani's version describes how the images of Muthuramalinga Thevar as clean-shaven reflect a spiritually refined individual who gave up his moustache for religious reasons. The more

aggressive Thevar Peravai, thus, chose an image of Muthuramalinga Thevar with a moustache as a conscious attempt to promote him as an icon reflecting ‘naturalised’ Thevar qualities. Most organisations use both versions of the image; depending on the purpose. The iconographic pattern of Muthuramalinga Thevar is marked by dualism; in domestic space (sacral) the motifs from the Hindu universe abound. In public spaces (political), statues in prominent cities and towns depict his pose during speeches holding a rolled paper in his right hand representing his effort to break the shackles of colonial oppression (the CTA). Thus the iconographic pattern of Muthuramalinga Thevar clearly traverses between the sacral and the political.

Entering the Sacral Realm as a Presiding Deity

Having seen how Muthuramalinga Thevar cemented his place in politics, I now show how he has been invested with magical powers and divinity. The sacralisation of Muthuramalinga Thevar is predominantly found amongst the Thevars of Ramanathapuram district and the Usilampatti region of Madurai. Navamani informed me that he is worshipped more in southern districts than the Thanjavur delta region.³⁸ Though there are many villages where Thevar has been worshipped in accordance with the Hindu tradition, I chose Panaiyur and Keezhathooval villages for my fieldwork. Keezhathooval village has earned notoriety as having the most aggressive and diehard supporters of Muthuramalinga Thevar right from his lifetime. In this sense, such worship is to be expected. I, therefore, conducted fieldwork in Panaiyur village where Muthuramalinga Thevar is the only worshipped deity in a village with a non-Thevar caste majority (though the Thevars are the dominant caste).

Maasi Kelari (Eleventh Month of Tamil Calendar dedicated to ancestor worship) is a festival for worshipping the ancestors in Tamil culture. Deification can be seen as an extension of this practice. Deification reaches its apogee in Keezhathooval and so we

³⁸ There are significant differences between the Kallars of Madurai and Ramanathapuram and those of the delta region of Thanjavur, who are perceived to be less fierce and lived as cultivators. This link towards agriculture and land was attributed to civility. As pointed out by Dumont (2000: 15) the Thanjavur Kallars, ‘look with scorn on their Madurai brothers, whom they consider coarse and half-savage.’

look first at how Thevar is worshipped in Panaiyur village. This is a nondescript village, which borders the Virudhunagar and Ramanathapuram districts, under the Tiruchuzhi taluk in Southern Tamil Nadu:

As I walked through to the village with my informant Vellai Pandian, I could see the marriage posters of a Thevar family, which read *Thevar Kottaiyil Thiruvizha* (Festival in Thevar's Fortress) and carried images of Muthuramalinga Thevar, thus strongly indicating that the village has a dominant presence of Thevars. As we strode through the village to reach the square, I could see how interesting the landscape was; I found that the only temple here was that of Muthuramalinga Thevar, *Deiveega Thirumagan Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Thirukkoil Panaiyur* (Divine Descendant Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Temple Panaiyur) who is the presiding deity. As there are no other temples in the village, Muthuramalinga Thevar is also the general deity. Interested to know more about the temple, I asked Vellai Pandian to help me talk to the temple authorities. We found a youngster and Pandian spoke to him about the purpose of our visit and after hearing that he went to bring the village priest. Meanwhile, we started exploring the temple. The structure of the temple was small in size but built in concrete without the *vimana* (Tower), a prominent feature of Dravidian temple architecture. Small statues of Goddess Meenakshi, Lord Vinayagar and Lord Murugan were part of the structure on the façade's top portion, and two peacocks stood on the far ends of both sides. The main presiding deity Muthuramalinga Thevar was in his usual white *veshti* and *jippa* (a full sleeve shirt) with a yellow shawl wrapped around his shoulders

The dark-skinned and big mustachioed temple priest and soothsayer Kandasamy Thevar sporting thick ash on his forehead came to the temple. After introducing myself I started a conversation with him. He took us to the nearby village square and sat beside us. ...

K: What's special in the village?

Kandasamy: We have the festival of our God coming up.

K: Oh that's nice, I see that you are worshipping Muthuramalinga Thevar.

Kandasamy: *Thambi* (Younger Brother), he is our lineage god and also our only God.

When I asked him about the temple and its significance he got very enthusiastic and started explaining that:

Kandasamy: The godly Thevar's *jayanthi* celebrations are just a month away, from the first week of October, women in the community will be observing fast and growing sprouts as part of the rituals to commemorate the event. *Kaapu Kayiru* (guardian thread), which is believed to ward off evils, will be tied to the youth and by tying the threads they dedicate themselves to carrying out works related to the temple and organising the festivities. For the whole month the families in the village, including children, youth and elders will remain highly

spiritual, abstaining from engaging in vices. *Thevar jayanthi* here is celebrated as a temple festival and it is the only festival we organise. 15 days ahead of the festival the temple flag will be hoisted as a mark that the celebrations have officially begun.

He got emotional when I asked him about Muthuramalinga Thevar and addressing him as *Deivam* (God) he said:

Kandasamy: ... Muthuramalinga Thevar is the only deity who protects the village since its inception in the year 1964. But there was no proper structure during that time and it was in the year 1995 that we built a fully-fledged structure.

Then pausing for a moment he raised his arm and said, ‘the marked speciality of this temple is that when women pray to the god Thevar demanding fulfillment of their vows and needs, Thevar makes that happen. For example, married women who have no children after offering prayers and observing fasts regularly and fulfilling their oaths became fertile and were blessed with children.’ When I asked him ‘why are you worshipping him as a god and why are there not temples for other gods?’ he explained that he is Lord Murugan who took birth as a human being, so raising a temple for Lord Murugan or our *Deiva Thirumugan* (Divine Descendant) is both one and the same. There are a lot of stories of young unmarried women who after offering prayers and observing rituals demanding good bridegrooms were able to find their perfect matches. Once Thevar fulfills their demands, the happy couples name their sons after Muthuramalinga Thevar. (Field Notes, Panaiyur, September 2014)

This deification of Thevar in Panaiyur is an interesting phenomenon. The installation of the temple in itself reveals the commemorative element attached to the deification and how it is socially generated. The reason behind such deifications is linked to the pre-existing practices of ‘folk Hinduism’, which Blackburn (1985) defines as functioning within the local community and among specific social groups. Though this holds true in the case of Muthuramalinga Thevar, his deification is not confined within his own specific caste but is spread across different castes among the Thevars. Moreover, unlike the figures found in folk Hinduism, his location within the spatial imagination and practice is not distinct - as we can see here, he is the main deity but there are also figures like Meenakshi, Vinayagar and Murugan. Another significant feature of Panaiyur village is that the mercantile caste group of Chettiars is in the majority. Due to migration to urban centres, the village does not showcase their presence and the Thevars remain the most visible and dominant caste in the region, yet, the Chettiars, a few families of Arunthathiyars and a caste of blacksmiths have also accepted Thevar and started to worship him.

Thevar here is presented as a god whom all castes can worship and his deification follows the Brahmanical rather than folklore tradition of village gods or guardian deities. The structure and style of the ritualistic celebrations also suggest this. As indicated by the village priest, the villagers devoutly observe the practice of fasting and abstain from earthly pleasures for almost a month in the run up to *Thevar Jayanthi*. There is also a widespread belief in the village that Thevar's sacred/magical powers make infertile women fertile. These beliefs in magical properties and practices are a common feature of the Hindu tradition; rural tradition is particularly abundant with deities, rituals and magical practices related to crop and human life cycles. Even during his lifetime Thevar was mythicised as someone who had supernatural qualities,³⁹ and epitomised the martial values of the Thevar community. The following example from another village where there is a temple dedicated to Muthuramalinga Thevar, exemplifies how there are certain similarities and distinctions in the worship and deification process between places.

The Diehard Devotees of Thevar in Keezhathooval

Keezhathooval village, near Paramakudi, is famous for various reasons; all the accused in the murder of Dalit leader Immanuel (except Muthuramalinga Thevar) were from the village and during the 1957 Mudukulathur riots five residents were shot dead by police. It attracted national attention following this encounter and featured in heated debates in the Tamil Nadu Assembly. The villagers annually commemorate the incident as *Aivar Dhinam* (Day of the Five) and leaders from the community participate. After hearing much about the village from many of my interlocutors, I visited it for the first time in October 2014. My informant there was Ramasamy Thevar, president of the *Appanadu Maravar Sangam* (Association of Appanadu Maravars) who told me about Muthuramalinga Thevar.

He told me that he was born as a human being, lived his life like a great sage

³⁹ Muthuramalinga Thevar's biography has stories about his supernatural powers, which include disappearing while talking etc (Perumal, 1993).

and is now visually present as the reincarnation of Lord Murugan. The loyalists in the village have built a Thevar *Aalayam* (Temple), located in the village square, which is called *Thevar Thidal* (Thevar Field). The *Aalayam* is a structure juxtaposing the *Siddhivinayakar* (Enlightened Lord Ganesh who is also the elder brother of Lord Murugan) and Lord Murugan Temple. The small piece of vacant land in front of these temples is where the village organises festivals etc. The *Aalayam* built by villagers on the land provided by Karikala Thevar's grandsons is a structure that has a stage and bronze life-size statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar on the top and like most of the motifs, it has peacocks on both sides of Muthuramalinga Thevar. A decorative arch that covers the statue features Lord Shiva with Goddess Parvathi and seated next to them is Lord Muruga as a child (see figure 5). The *Aalayam*'s lower portion is that of a stage and has iron grills on three sides with the front part featuring an iron-grilled door. The wall to which the iron grills are attached has hand painted images of P. Mookaiah Thevar, Subash Chandra Bose, the Marudhu Brothers, Pulithevan on a galloping horse and Swami Vivekananda, and on top of these images are the symbols of the Chera Chola and Pandya Kingdoms, the Bow and Arrow and Tiger and Fish respectively.



Figure 5. The *Thevar Aalayam* at Keezhathooval Village.

Anbu, who calls himself a hardcore devotee of Thevar, is a youth, conscious and proud of his identity as a Thevar. He told me that Keezhathooval village has many specialities; it is the only Thevar dominated village where there are no movements or political organisations, and they do not endorse any leader or organisation. They show equal respect if an individual is from the Thevar community but there will be no special treatments for any leader. He stressed that: 'Keezhathooval village will never accept anyone apart from *ayya* Muthuramalinga Thevar. He is the only leader we worship. (Field Notes, Keezhathooval, October 2014)

The data from Panaiyur and Keezhathooval indicate that the sacral image of Thevar as a

reincarnation of Lord Murugan is actually put into practice. The rituals are personal and subjective experiences, though largely performed collectively. Once many people identify with the image over a long period of time, it gains iconic status. The deification of Thevar is complete in both Panaiyur and Keezhathooval; proper concrete structures have been built and are worshipped on a daily basis in the former and mostly on Fridays and other auspicious days in the latter. In these villages, the refusal to accord the same status to the existing Hindu pantheon of gods shows the continual symbolic reverence of those seen as extraordinary individuals. The iconographic pattern followed in the temple structures built by the villagers is striking. Drawing upon Hindu mythology, they have constructed them along the lines of Lord Murugan. It is believed by the community that the spirit of Thevar resides forever in each monument, bestowing benefactions on the community, who see him as a saviour.

This sacralisation of a political icon, as discussed in the literature on MGR, builds on folk traditions that invest humans with divine attributes. This is a two-way process; worshippers invest the icon with mystical powers, but by doing so they expect that their desires will be fulfilled and the icon will protect them from evil forces. Tamils often venerate human beings to the level of demigods, maintaining a belief that a few among the dead possess great magical powers. The tradition to erect hero-stones is long-standing among Non-Brahmin castes. Most of the village Gods or guardian deities were actually 'heroes' who laid down their lives for the sake of their community. The sacralisation of Thevar, can be read as a continuation of this tradition and folk Hinduism with certain modifications. Though venerated by the Thevars as the seventh reincarnation of Lord Murugan, he was initially confined to the community. It was during the mid-1980s, after many Thevars entered the Tamil film industry as producers and film distributors, that Thevar's image were taken to a wider audience through mainstream films. Following Pandian (1992), I argue that this iconisation process through visual media is an extension of the commemorative symbolism practiced by Dravidian iconography. According to Pandian (1992) the DMK, which espouses rationalist principles, displaced God from His customary space and constituted their own pantheon of Dravidian leaders, though only MGR achieved demigod status before

Muthuramalinga Thevar.

Encountering Visuality and Aurality through Film Sequences and Songs

In the construction of an icon, aural elements intensify sensations (see Jay, 1988). Images and sounds both carry auratic power. Images bring in the charismatic element and pictorial representations create stronger emotional bonds within a collective, and film is an important medium through which Muthuramalinga Thevar was iconicised in the larger public domain. Example of film sequences and songs will illustrate how Muthuramalinga Thevar is showcased as a sacral entity. The films are selected on the basis of Compact Discs (CDs) played and sold during events like Thevar GP and the anniversary of the Marudhu Brothers. These CDs consist of film songs and sequences that glorify Muthuramalinga Thevar and his caste. The magazine *Thevar Malar* features a special section entitled ‘Thevar Talkies’, where Filmography on Thevar⁴⁰ and the Thevars is discussed. This section looks at an example from what I call ‘Thevar Genre’ films, where certain idioms signify that the film is about the Thevars without explicitly saying so (see Krishnan, 2009).

In the film *Thevar Veetu Ponnu* (The Girl of Thevar’s House, Dir: Rama Narayanan, 1992), the character Mookaiah Thevar from Mudukulathur village is shown as a man of great piety and bravery. Sporting a big moustache and flowing locks tied up, he lives in a massive bungalow but wears a simple white veshti and shirt. In one scene, he worships a portrait of Muthuramalinga Thevar hung in his living room and also a plough. A friend of his enters and says: ‘I have seen so many devotees but your devotion is something unique.’ Mookaiah Thevar responds laughing: ‘There may be a thousand gods in the world but the god that I first worship is our Pasumpon Ayya (Muthuramalinga Thevar), today I have estates, land, farms, a car and a bungalow, but in the beginning it was the plough which gave me food to eat so my second respect is for that’.

⁴⁰ For analysis of the symbiotic relationship between caste politics and cinema with specific reference to Thevars see Karthikeyan and Gorringer (2017), Vasudevan (2017), and Krishnan (2009).

In the film Mookaiah Thevar's daughter is killed by villains but roams around as a spirit on the one hand, but is also born again elsewhere and returns to replace the dead girl and seek revenge. In one scene, the spirit-girl tells her replacement: 'You cannot win against the enemies alone and as a spirit I will join you inside your body to provide strength. Keep thinking about our 'Lion from the South,' Pasumpon Ayya. You will naturally feel brave.' The girl, on hearing this, turns to glance at the portrait of Muthuramalinga Thevar and the camera pans to show it. The spirit girl continues, 'Yes, on hearing Pasumpon Ayya's name, even the meek cow will turn into a tiger.' The screen then flashes with red colour through which the juxtaposed images of the girl and Muthuramalinga Thevar gaze at each other. Red here symbolises seething rage and bravery. The gaze and the return of gaze is also a sign of darshan, where the devotee looks at the deity and the deity looks back. This returned gaze makes her brave enough to quell her enemies and emerge victorious (Eck, 1985).

In the above film sequences, Muthuramalinga Thevar is constructed as invincible and possessing magical powers through 'mimetic machinery' (Benjamin, 1970). There is an attempt to blend the impossible religious myths with the cult of Muthuramalinga Thevar and his deification, previously limited to community members, becomes part of the optical unconscious of general movie-goers. The film and its songs, as part of the archive and its mechanical reproducibility, thus extend Thevar's cultic domain. Benjamin (1970) implies that it is the universalising intention of the masses that is realised in technological reproduction. The decline of an aura is described as inevitable due to the masses continually getting closer to things spatially and replacing uniqueness with sameness by means of technological reproduction. I disagree with Benjamin's theorisation and posit instead, that in this case film and photography reproduce the cult image, rather than contradicting it. Another classic example is that of Che Guevara. His iconic image, *Guerrillero Heroico*, shot by Albert Korda, is the second most reproduced image in the world and still carries an aura despite crass commercialisation. It is a global icon for resistance movements and continues to symbolise dissent (Ziff, 2006).

Aural elements have also cemented Thevar's iconicity. The Tamil tradition of folk

music is replete with songs for every occasion; women working in paddy fields used to sing lullabies, dirges and folk ballads. Ballads usually feature folk heroes and men of valour. Navamani observes that in southern Tamil Nadu during festivals it is common for folk singers to honour Muthuramalinga Thevar. He comments that, ‘This tradition ... was later carried on to films’ (Interview with V.S. Navamani, June 2015).

The folk artists used to sing songs praising Thevar in villages because it would fetch them money. Mokkaiyan, a FB MLA broke into a song in praise of Lord Muruga and his mentor, the party leader Muthuramalinga Thevar in an Assembly session in July 1980. Through it he made a strong plea to install a portrait of his leader in the house, and Chief Minister MGR responded positively (*Times of India*, 1980). Songs praising Muthuramalinga Thevar, thus, are part of a folk tradition dating back to the 1950s but have increasingly entered film and politics since the 1980s. The song mentioned at the head of the chapter eulogises Muthuramalinga Thevar and images in the accompanying video celebrate his qualities and further the sacralisation process. Such songs are staple features in commemoration and community events, and Mokkaiyan’s intervention above illustrates how they are bound up with politics and power. The playing of Thevar anthems, thus, does not go unremarked and has resulted in violence in southern districts, foregrounding how these images and songs are received.

Reception of the Iconic Muthuramalinga Thevar

The reception of Thevar can be seen from many aspects: in the political realm, as we have seen, he gained greater prominence posthumously as a symbol of the Thevar community. His iconic position in contemporary Tamil politics is complete as seen in the fact that even Dalit leaders like Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan, whose politics is antithetical to Muthuramalinga Thevar’s, garland his statues during election campaigns. In terms of his sacralisation, the transformation of the Muthuramalinga Thevar memorial into a shrine and the construction of a separate *dhyana mandapam* (Meditation Hall) in Pasumpon with state approval exemplify it. The Thevar memorial as a site of commemoration indicates how the Thevar icon is received. On his birth anniversary

(Guru Puja), thousands of people and leading politicians gather to pay homage while Thevar community members worship. We have seen that there have been tangible efforts to institutionalise Thevar's memory in formal politics too. The popular reception within the community and political circles is evident: The poor among the Thevars who worship him believe that Thevar possessed extraordinary qualities. He is seen as a divine descendant who was able to transcend ordinary desires and sacrificed his youth and spent most of his days in jail fighting for country and community.

Thevar households, as we have seen, worship Thevar, as the 7th incarnation of Lord Murugan; his birthplace Pasumpon is now referred to as the seventh abode, and his anniversary is referred to as *Shashtiya Pooja* (according to Hindu mythology, the day when Lord Muruga annihilated all the demons). *Thevar Malar* magazine had a cover story and photo thanking all the Thevar devotees who visited Pasumpon to observe the *Shashtiya Pooja*. A common tale relates how the peacocks that he raised in his Tirunagar home committed suicide following his death by flying high and folding their wings, thereby fatally falling to the ground (Perumal, 1993; *Thevar Malar*, November 2014). Sacralisation, however, has resulted in a dilemma among his followers according to Murugan Ji, founder president of Bharatiya Forward Bloc⁴¹:

Should we see Muthuramalinga Thevar as a political leader or God, this is a current development whether to perceive him within that binary. Thevar is caught between these two extreme manifestations and it is highly confusing. People who have accepted him as a leader, people who revere him or worship him are struck by this confusion. They are confused a lot to accept which manifestation among the two (Interview with Murugan Ji, June 2015).

Murugan Ji asserted that there was lack of understanding about Thevar and many attempts to discredit him and curtail his influence:

The Congress tried to depict him as a casteist, the Thevar community also, to showcase that they are Thevars, celebrate and use him as a symbol of caste. It was a planned effort to destroy his politics and ideology and cast him as a casteist. Caste organisations, which hail Thevar, do not know anything fully about him.

⁴¹ The Forward Bloc of Muthuramalinga Thevar's time has splintered into various factions in Tamil Nadu. Bharatiya Forward Bloc was founded by K.A.Murugan who is popularly known as Murugan Ji from Usilampatti in Madurai district. His party is ideologically close to Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

Most of the community leaders of today's time want to project him as a God. So his true ideas, beliefs and patriotism, nationalism are getting sidelined.

According to Murugan, Thevar was not a religious head propagating religion or representing any mutt, he was basically a leader of a political party who believed in democracy and electoral politics and stood in elections and was an MP and MLA. Efforts to portray him as a god actually delink him from politics so that members of all these political parties could attend the event as he is then imagined as a representative of the Thevar community. This then confines him as a caste icon and this is what is being done by Thevar caste organisations and by other political parties in the name of GP, he said.



Figure 6. Nethaji Socialist Front poster stating that Muthuramalinga Thevar is a socialist and nationalist and not a casteist.

Murugan Ji continued that the duty of his cadres should be to follow his ideals and principles:

They talk about Periyarism, Gandhism, Annaism so these isms and the ideals of Thevar should be followed in such a model. It is a betrayal to him to cast him as a caste leader or see him as a god. This GP and related events, which are trying to project him as a caste leader/icon, started only after 1986 when these Dravidian parties took over the celebrations of GP from FB.

The emotive and political power of the GP's is such, however, that even Murugan Ji is unable to stand aside as we shall see in the following chapter.

Conclusion

We have explored the iconisation and iconicity of Muthuramalinga Thevar in detail. As an intermediary of morals, the icon establishes a unified set of public discourses and collective identities, but an icon always runs the risk of iconoclasm (Ghosh, 2011: 58). The deification and veneration of a popular icon does not happen in isolation and is accompanied by a psychic structure, which attracts desecration. Muthuramalinga Thevar remains a highly contested signifier venerated as god and saint-like figure by the Thevar community while attracting resistance as a symbol of dominance and refusal of equal rights to Dalits. Thevar's iconography, thus, is ineluctably political and signifies a binding force that keeps the three clans together. Thevar statues have proliferated, partly as a challenge to the rise of Dalit imagery, with powerful caste men patronising such efforts. Thevar politics or iconography here is not empty symbolism but a source of power.

Most of the narratives about the supernatural qualities of Muthuramalinga Thevar take place in an imaginary time-frame, outside of normal time. This iconography is a necessary ingredient for Thevar dominance. They have invested a lot in iconography and have created a cultural universe in which Thevar reigns supreme over every other figure in Tamil politics. For the Thevars, statues, signboards, colours and other forms of imagery in urban and rural spaces mark their presence and dominance (see Gorringe, 2005). The GP marks the apex of the iconisation process in which the visual is wedded to public performances and occupation of space, and this is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Thevar Guru Puja: Politics, Caste and Identity

Introduction

During three days in Pasumpon, in October 2014, I witnessed how the non-descript village in East Ramnad has become a site for political pilgrimage. Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, O. Panneer Selvam flew in a helicopter from Chennai with a coterie of his ministers and paid homage at Muthuramalinga Thevar's memorial. A few hours after this, the DMK's treasurer and heir-in-waiting M.K. Stalin arrived with key members of the party, mostly from the Thevar community. From 8.a.m. until 4 p.m., important political leaders queued up to pay homage. I cannot think of any other political personality in Tamil Nadu for whom all the political parties extend such respect. The only exception are the leaders of the Dalit parties who do not participate due to the history of antagonism, but even they venerate him on other occasions and garland his statues.

Muthuramalinga Thevar *Guru Puja* (Leader Worship - Thevar GP hereafter) has emerged as the most important annual political event in recent decades. In the following pages, I provide an ethnographical account of Thevar GP and illustrate how, through its associated performances, a collective social identity is produced and politicised. In the popular understanding, GPs are commemorative events including public processions that mark and celebrate the birth anniversaries of prominent caste and political leaders. In Tamil Nadu, the most widely attended annual GP event is Thevar GP, which marks the birth and death anniversaries of Muthuramalinga Thevar. This event provides the arena for a public enactment of the locally dominant Thevar community's strength and power through the appropriation of public space and the organisation of mass rallies, flag-hoisting ceremonies and related events. Contemporarily there have been heightened levels of identity-based conflicts over the GP celebrations of prominent leaders, and the usage of the term 'Guru Puja' in itself has become controversial.

For our understanding then, it becomes crucial to unpack the spatial meanings attached to Thevar GP as an event. The event, which was initially celebrated in a simple manner, was announced as a state function in 1980. Becoming a state-sponsored event accords legitimacy – police protection is assured, roads are blocked and traffic redirected to facilitate the procession of Thevars bearing flowers with which to garland the statue of their leader (Karthikeyan et al., 2012). Different Thevar caste associations and political outfits started utilising the occasion to display their strength and caste pride and reinforce superiority and dominance over other castes. The institutionalised nature of Thevar GP, through consciously created myths and Thevar's iconisation, canonisation and the construction of a social identity, provides a point of entry to study how political power is ritually constructed. The portrayal of the event in media reports focuses on its sensitive nature and violence between the Thevars and Dalits, however a close ethnography provides deeper meanings, including the interplay between politics, religiosity and elements of spiritualism.

In this chapter, first I examine the various definitions of GP, what the leaders of the Thevar community say about them and where they locate this event. I then provide a genealogical account of GP by drawing upon primary and secondary sources. I go on to discuss the preparations, offer an ethnographic account of the GP - looking at various aspects of the Puja through the opinions of the participants – and conclude by discussing the performative politics and spatial meanings of Thevar GP.

Of Gurus and Guru Pujas

According to the Hindu tradition, the guru (teacher) is important for the development of a spiritual life. Hinduism as a religion is manifested or embodied in the continuing, successive presence of the guru. Mlecko (1982: 33) says that, 'It is the guru who reveals the meaning of life; he is the immediate, incarnate exemplar in life.' He also states that guruhood is the oldest form of religious education in the Hindu tradition. The chief priest at the Thevar GP *Kovai Kamatchipuri Adheenam Gnanaguru* (Coimbatore

Kamatchipuri Mutt Spiritual Head) Sivalingeswara Swamigal told me:

[The] guru is someone who clears ignorance, who gives us wisdom, who helps us understand difficult things in life. [The] guru teaches us things that we should follow to lead a better life. (Interview, Pasumpon, October 2014).

Mlecko argues that the word ‘guru’ means many things. He is an entity, a teacher, counselor, father-image, mature ideal, hero, source of strength, and even divinity, integrated into one personality. The guru is ‘indispensable for spiritual development’ (Mlecko, 1982: 34). Vivekananda (1863-1902) is a significant member of the guru tradition in modern times. According to him:

The guru must be worshipped as God. He is God; he is nothing less than that. As you look at him, gradually the guru melts away, and what is left? The guru picture gives place to God Himself. The guru is the bright mask, which God wears in order to come to us. (Cited in Mlecko, 1982: 53)

This assessment of Vivekananda was seen as a dramatic development in Hinduism and guruhood. It emphasises the transcendence of humans who go from gurus to gods. This is important to our understanding of Thevar GP; as I will show. Nanda (2009) offers a typology of gurus, differentiating between type 1 gurus - whose guruhood is dependent on the belief of their devotees in their miraculous powers - and type 2 gurus whose appeal lies in their philosophical renderings of the Hindu vedas and scriptures. Type 3 gurus are people who are known for their spiritual endeavours, like meditation and yoga.

It is difficult to categorise Thevar within these ‘types’ as his traversal between the spiritual and political domains remains contested. His life is marked by his flirtations with the spiritual domain as a saivait follower attached to a mutt delivering religious discourses, but he was largely a political figure who was seen as the representative of the Thevar community. According to his followers, he is a spiritual guru and worthy of GP, but the fact that he was a popular political figure with a certain degree of controversy means that the celebrations surrounding him have spawned various replications. Having now explored the meaning of the guru, let’s focus on what Guru Puja(GP) is.

According to Sivalingeswarar,

GP is when your leader is alive⁴², you decorate him and worship him with lighting lamps and flowers and treat him on par with God. Once the *Pujai* (worship) is done there are instances where the guru is carried in a palanquin or a temple car on a procession. (Interview, October 2014)

In other words, during GP, the Guru is treated like a deity. Also after the death of the guru, following the tradition of worship, GP can be performed at memorial temples and sites. Sivalingeswarar elaborated on how the GP is performed by the disciples:

In order to remember those who have attained *mukthi* (salvation), based on their star signs, their day of passing, worship will be done. Religious discourse based on their leadership and also on their glorious life would be rendered by prominent religious people. This would be followed by cultural events and people would be allowed to worship the deity. (Interview, October 2014)

Holstrom (1971) analyses the GP of Mownaguru. He explains that it is celebrated for nine nights and includes religious entertainments and moral discourses, and concerts of classical South Indian music, which draw huge crowds. Aside from being religious events, GPs here can also be read as commemorations that gather the community for a purpose.

Tracing the Thevar GP

Whilst GPs are traditionally associated with religious and spiritual leaders, there has been a tendency in Tamil Nadu to term commemorations of various socio-political leaders and heroes as GPs. The tradition of venerating socio-political leaders dates back to 1904 at least. The earliest example I uncovered is that of Iyodhi Doss⁴³ Pandithar, a prominent Dalit intellectual and social reformer in the erstwhile Madras Presidency. A notice printed by The South Indian Sakya Buddhist Society, Madras, announces the 22nd Annual GP of Pandit C. Iyodhi Doss in June 1936 (Figure 7).⁴⁴ The notice carrying the profile picture of Iyodhi Doss was printed in both English and Tamil, and suggests that GPs for Iyodhi Doss started after his demise in 1914. Stalin Rajangam, Dalit intellectual

⁴² This is contested terrain. GPs are usually done in honour of spiritual masters who have passed away, but there are occasions where GPs have been organized for leaders who are alive.

⁴³ Various authors have used different spellings for Iyodhi Doss, like Iyothee Thass, Ayodhidas etc, I follow the spelling used in the notice.

⁴⁴ Paari Chezian of Pandit Ayodhidas Research Centre Madurai provided this primary material.

[illegible]

There has evidently been a slippage in the meaning of GP, and popular reference now associates it with political leaders. Driving this association in post-colonial Tamil Nadu has been the elaborate performance and politicised nature of Theyar GP. Many new GPs

have now emerged, influenced by its reception. These include those for Dalit leader Immanuel, the Marudhu Pandiar brothers, Veeran Alagu Muthu Kone (an 18th century chieftain), Mookaiah Thevar (a disciple of Muthuramalinga Thevar and former MP) and Mani Kuravar (a folk hero). Given its impact on the politico-cultural realm, it is pertinent to trace the genealogy of Thevar GP. Sivalingeswarar provides a highly mythicised account of why it is celebrated:

Thevar followed the Saivaite tradition, he always sported sacred ash on his forehead and wore Rudraksha (believed mythically to be Lord Shiva's tear drop, it is actually a seed from the tree called *Elaeocarpus*) chain and was coming around as a Saivaite saint. He was born on an auspicious day associated with Lord Murugan and died on the same day. He is a *Deiveega Thirumagan* (Divine Descendant) who transformed his home into a mutt and helped people who came there seeking help. As per his wish his heirs buried him in his ancestral home and the people here worship him as a deity. The Vallanadu *Siddhar* Chidambara Swamigal (Saint from Vallanadu near Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu) performed the GP for a long time. And after his demise I took over. (Interview, October 2014)

The above account indicates that there were attempts to present him as primarily a spiritually refined individual who was involved in politics. A sense of prophecy is attached to his life and his GP is portrayed as the natural veneration of followers for saints, rather than a concerted effort to keep his memory alive through constructed commemorative practices. In actuality there was nothing natural or inevitable about the memorialisation process.

The humble beginnings of the GP as a localised event specific to both the village of Pasumpon and to the FB party, fail to suggest its subsequent growth. Thevar GP today is an event attended by close to 2,00,000 people annually, but when it was started in the year 1964 there were hardly any attendees. Fewer than two hundred individuals came for the celebrations and there was not even a proper memorial, according to P.V. Kathiravan a Usilampatti Forward Bloc MLA, and T. Arappa of the Agamudaiyar Sangam (Interview with Kathiravan, October 2014; and Arappa, June 2015). In the following pages I chart the different phases that the GP has gone through in order to become Tamil Nadu's most prominent commemoration.

Historian and writer V.S.Navamani provided me with the special souvenir released to mark the centenary of Thevar jayanthi.⁴⁵ It says that the event began while Muthuramalinga Thevar was still alive.

Thevar GP is unique for it was not the Thevars who celebrated Thevar GP, not even FB. During the year 1956 the Muslims living in Burma invited Thevar to Burma, he went there and stayed there for nine months and was involved in politics and spiritual activities. It was during that time the Burmese Tamils and Muslims organised the Thevar GP and Jayanthi (birthday) event. After Thevar passed away in 1963, his body was taken from Madurai to Pasumpon, Vallanadu Chidambara Swamigal performed the last rites, a 10 x 10 foot ground was dug and Thevar was laid down in the *padmasana* (Meditation pose) facing east according to the Saivaite tradition. As per the Tirunelveli Kondaiyankottai Maravar tradition, after a gap of 41 days (December-8) the first mandala puja was performed. This was how Thevar's last rites were performed and that's why from then till now we are organising Jayanthi-GP for him. During the first Mandala Puja held on Dec 8, 1963, there was a ban order imposed by the Congress government that the FB cadres should not participate. The Order read that Mookaiah Thevar and other leaders should not enter Pasumpon to participate in the Mandala Puja, however, defying the order Mookaiah Thevar placed a garland and got arrested. FB from 1964 onwards, organised GP and jayanthi events. Mookaiah Thevar planned well in advance and organised the events by separating October 28 for spiritual events, followed by political events on October 29. Drama and other cultural events would also be held and finally the GP would conclude with a speech by Mookaiah Thevar. On October 30 the focus shifts to Madurai for jayanthi celebrations, a rally and a public meeting was regularly held at Thilagar Thidal. And when the huge Thevar statue was installed near Goripalayam in 1974, the event saw a change and from then onwards a lot of ritualistic celebrations were done around the statue. Leaders and members of the community started garlanding the Thevar statue at Goripalayam and congregated there for various rituals. FB's rally in Madurai city was important as members of the community started coming from all over Tamil Nadu. This gathering slowly attracted the political parties who also started coming to Pasumpon and organised events (Thevar Guru Puja Centenary Souvenir, 2007).

I have quoted this rather gratifying account of Thevar GP origins at length because it highlights the attempts to both sacralise and secularise his image to make him a saintly figure who was involved in everyday politics. The article also notes the detailed planning that went into the construction of a spiritual and political legacy with the sequencing of events into spiritual and political allowing him to traverse both domains. Arappa, a longtime FB member and one of the few who were involved in the planning process to make Thevar GP an important political event, informs us that there was a

⁴⁵ V.S.Navamani provided most of the primary and secondary materials related to Muthuramalinga Thevar.

concrete plan for the commemoration. The events were planned to bring in different aspects of his life; there was strong mythicising as well as ‘political entrepreneurship’ (Wyatt, 2010). Mookaiah Thevar, the political heir and disciple of Muthuramalinga Thevar, oversaw the establishment of these commemorations along spiritual, caste and political lines.

In contrast to this polished account, a different version emerges from a booklet published in 1967 by the *Pasumpon U. Muthuramalinga Thevar Samajam* (Pasumpon U Muthuramalinga Thevar Association) titled *Vendukol* (Request/Appeal). This shows how a popular appeal was made to the community to payback and recognise Thevar’s efforts and keep his legacy alive. Written in a highly emotive tone, it castigates the readers and people of the Thevar community for not giving due recognition to Muthuramalinga Thevar. The booklet is the first person account of K. Sankaran from Kamudhi, who later formed the *Thevar Samajam*, and recounts how he went to the Thevar sepulcher on 4th June 1967 and found it in ruins. He asks what the readers will do for Muthuramalinga Thevar, who lived like a saint and fought for the abolition of the CTA. He then appeals to the community to come forward and take a pledge to build a memorial and make it a pilgrimage site. He also appeals for the construction of Memorial Colleges. The booklet informs us that there was a ban on GP at the time, which seems to have been effective.

The booklet contains a hagiographical portrayal of Muthuramalinga Thevar as a divine figure to whom the Thevar caste cluster is indebted. Eliciting guilt in the reader, the booklet not only talks about his political contributions but delivers a highly emotional account of his spiritual and divine power. His munificence and simplicity is highlighted and his personal life depicted as a sacrifice. The author tries to prick the conscience of community members, claiming that it would be a sin if they failed to memorialise him. A sense of political entrepreneurship is at play here and a significant effort to cultivate a distinct caste tradition can be seen in the appeal to the Maravars that is linked to their martial prowess and role as guardians of Tamil culture. As Wyatt (2010) informs us, political entrepreneurs can cultivate and exploit a given situation by validating a caste

culture with symbolic or actual rewards. It was after this intervention that the GP started to grow, and it was only in the mid-1970s that Dravidian parties took a hand.

Keezhathooval Ramasamy Thevar, one of the organisers, described how the GP was celebrated prior to the 1990s and how it was politicised later:

In the 1970s, the DMK's former MLA, Vellaisami alias Kader Batcha, representing Mudukulathur constituency (1971-6 and 1989-90) and a member of the Thevar caste, used to come to Pasumpon on GP and pay homage and later in the evening used to organise a public meeting in Kamudhi. During that time, influential DMK second rung leaders and powerful orators Vaiko, Kalimuthu and K. Subbu as a team used to visit Pasumpon and address the meetings as they saw a lot of people gathering for the GP and to make use of it politically to strengthen DMK in the southern districts. (Interview, October 2014)

Vellaisami and other senior DMK members from the Thevar community, used their proximity to Mookaiah Thevar instrumentally to advance the DMK in southern districts (Karthikeyan, 2012b). Ramasamy Thevar explains the transformation of the GP:

Before it was politicised in the 1990s, people from each village because of their affinity towards Thevar would come here and pay homage and worship and then go to Madurai and participate in the rallies around Thevar statue in Goripalayam. In Madurai, differences between FB leaders, the former MLAs Ayyannan Ambalam and Vallarasu turned them into two different groups and subsequently there were two different rallies led by each of them. It was during this time that Dr. N. Sethuraman (a doctor by profession who was attached to Thevar Peravai) also organised a rally in Madurai, unable to withstand the competition as FB had already made it popular he came to Pasumpon and organised a car festival and over the years he also organised *Annadhanam* (food served as a sacred offering). (Interview, October 2014)

The intense competition within the Thevar outfits for community leadership and visibility led to innovative ideas to grab the attention of the people. As a populist measure, as noted here, Dr. Sethuraman started serving food to those attending the event. This became a trend and others followed suit. Likewise, the Usilampatti MLA, P.V. Kathiravan's accounts about the GP bear testimony to the unintended consequences of what could be termed the appropriation of the event by Dravidian parties. When I met Kathiravan at the All India FB office in Madurai, there was a large vinyl poster of the leaping tiger, the symbol of the FB, in its usual red background pasted on the wall and on top of that were portraits of Bose, Muthuramalinga Thevar and Mookaiah Thevar,

hung from left to right. The portraits of the latter two were garlanded but Bose's was not (Figure 8). Ardent followers of Bose believe that he is still alive, so they leave his portraits ungarlanded and do not apply tilak on the forehead. Dressed like a typical Tamil politician, Kathiravan offered his recollections:

I remember travelling to GP from Usilampatti in lorries, it was during 1977-78, the Thevar GP as an event was getting bigger chiefly due to MGR's intervention. Prior to this, during DMK's regime (1971-76), in the year 1974 they unveiled a massive Thevar statue in Madurai. The then Indian president Varahagiri Venkata Giri came for the event; both Thevar and Giri during a struggle were incarcerated in the same prison. I participated in the statue-unveiling event held at Goripalayam as a youngster; the stage was put up facing towards the overbridge and I was standing far away near the Meenaskhi College entrance (approx. 2kms) then imagine how big the crowd was. The moment Kalaighar (M. Karunanidhi) started to speak there was pin drop silence, it was quite amazing to witness such a strong crowd all of a sudden turning into silence to hear him speak. So when the Thevar jayanthi becomes famous after the 1980s, members of various parties start attending the event. And over the time it became a huge event, many people started coming and conceptually it turned into something like this, 'If you want Thevar votes you better participate in the event and pay homage.' So it gained a specific symbolic value and one who doesn't attend the Thevar jayanthi and one who doesn't respect (avoiding becomes disrespect) Thevar, will not get our votes so this became the norm and given the electoral dynamics and the presence of Thevars nobody wishes to violate these norms. Thevar GP is now a major political event and currently is the biggest annual commemoration in Tamil Nadu. Even during the mid 1990s when L. Santhanam was the president of FB we used to travel to the GP in Ambassador cars from Madurai. We had a maximum of ten cars and this was the scene till the 2000's and after that it became an event to showcase each person and their respective party's power so we started going there in 50 to 100 vehicles, it included vans, cars and other SUVs and to organize 100 cars is such a difficult thing. (Interview, October 2014)



Figure 8: The ungarlanded portrait of Chandrabose at AIFB MLA P.V.Kathiravan's office, Madurai.

The above accounts indicate that Thevar GP was initially a small event confined to a small section of the Thevar community. Both the booklet and Mookaiah Thevar's efforts demonstrate that political entrepreneurship was in play as the leaders involved already imagined a bigger commemoration. Thevar GP and associated films and images performed Thevar dominance and power, and Dravidian attempts to secure their votes accentuated Thevar dominance in both the social and political worlds. Even to this day, they hold key posts in the higher echelons of the political bureaucracy and control access to common property resources. They occupy major posts in almost all the major political parties in the state. This accrued power and dominance is expressed and reinforced through the public performances at the Thevar GP.

The 1990s were an important phase in the assertion of Thevar caste pride and visible political patronage from the AIADMK government accentuated this. The commemoration of Muthuramalinga Thevar followed this trajectory; a huge statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar in Madras (now Chennai) was installed in 1993 and a main road was renamed after him, a Chair was instituted in his name at the Madurai Kamaraj University, and the government tried to officially unify the castes of Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar under the single caste name of Thevar. A Government Order was passed, pending implementation. Accompanying these markers, Thevar GP celebrations

expanded into the 2000s. Pandian (2000) describes how different associations of the Thevars utilise GP to showcase their strength through processions and other symbolic means. The significance of the huge Thevar statues in Madurai and in Chennai is crucial in that the caste geography associated with dominance in the rural feudal setup has been extended into the urban. Since the erection of the statues, they have become important locations for commemorative events. The celebrations around the statue in Madurai are replicated in Chennai, albeit with less fanfare, challenging the conception that Thevar power and GP is a south Tamil Nadu phenomenon. Before discussing the event itself, I will describe the preparations that precede it and go into making it such a huge occasion.

Preparations for Thevar Guru Puja

The significance of Thevar GP, both in terms of its politics and as a law and order issue, has currently reached new heights. The district administration and police department plan at least three months ahead of the event. Thevar organisations work to bring about conformity with the police regulations and meetings are held with the District Collector and Superintendent of Police. Before the GP, there is a lot of excitement; the statue in Madurai receives a fresh coat of paint (see figure 2), likewise in most villages the statues receive attention and worn out flags are replaced with newer ones. In several places they also re-paint the signboards. After getting permission, loudspeakers are installed in trees or mounted on walls, ready to blast out film and folk songs in praise of Muthuramalinga Thevar and the Thevars. In Madurai, since there is no ban, permission was granted three days prior to the event for songs of Thevar pride to be played from morning until 6 p.m.

The Thevar youth spend much time choosing the designs and words for the flexboards, posters, cutouts and festoons, which occupy the landscape. In Pasumpon, a complete visual occupation takes place (Figure 9). Intense visual signifiers are progressively mounted in the days leading up to the event. Since 2012, due to major incidences of violence, members who wish to erect banners and use posters have to seek police permission and wording and visual elements are policed to make sure that there is nothing provocative. In Pasumpon, the area closest to the Thevar memorial was fully

occupied by the ruling AIADMK party. It is the norm that the ruling party usually occupies this space. Two routes lead up to the memorial and the main one was lined with AIADMK flexboards and the party, which has earned the goodwill of the community, prevents others from laying claim to it. The other route is used by different organisations among the Thevars, who compete for visibility.



Figure 9. AIADMK workers erecting party flexboards on the road leading up to the Thevar Memorial.

In Madurai, three days before the event, Thevar youth gather excitedly during the nights to erect the boards. The city becomes a visual field full of images of Muthuramalinga Thevar along with Thevar iconography (including Thevar leaders, politicians and historical icons). At Goripalayam junction, around the Thevar statue, there was not any blank space left. Each banner was sponsored by a different Thevar organization – named in colourful text - ranging from political parties to caste-based community organizations, companies and individual families. Besides disclosing their sponsorship and perhaps including a line or two about Thevar, the prefix of *Deiveega Thirumagan* (Divine Descendant) was conspicuous. Strong visual elements that signify power, martial pride, and masculine aggression, were ubiquitous. A coterie of historical heroes like Marudhu Pandiars, Velu Nachiar, Puli Thevar and Subash Chandra Bose were shown carrying

swords and other weapons. These visual signifiers, which are central to what I call ‘Martial Symbolism’, form a crucial part of Thevar imaginary (Figure 10).



Figure 10: A Thevar Jayanthi poster at Pasumpon, hails Sridhar Vandayar of Moovendhar Munnetra Kazhagam as a ‘War Sword that cannot be contained under the Scabbard’.

The text in the banners, unlike in the past, came under a lot of scrutiny and had to be subtle in expressing dominance. For example, the poster above highlights the ‘naturalised’ masculinity of a Thevar leader as nothing can contain his *veeram* (Bravery/Courage). Previously, lines taken from film songs were common. Messages like: ‘We never intend to fight with anyone but if they try to pick up a fight we will never leave them as Tigers don’t lose’, send a statement to other communities (especially Dalits). Whilst wording is more closely scrutinised now than before, Thevars are still able to assert their dominance. The slogan ‘Everyone should live, but only Mukkulathors should rule’, for example, crept past the censors by celebrating everyone’s right to life.

Unlike in earlier times, the aural and visual signifiers now marked the culmination of several weeks of negotiations with government authorities in the respective districts of

Madurai and Ramanathapuram. The locally powerful and charismatic Bharatiya FB leader Murugan Ji told me about the restrictions:

As the situation was tense in Ramanathapuram, it was very difficult for the community heads to negotiate there ... While we were chatting with Murugan Ji, a phone call came where the person speaking from other side complained to Murugan Ji that the police are denying permission to paste posters near bus stands. An angry Murugan Ji shouted at him in a loud voice that Thevar is a national leader and no one can prevent his celebrations and asked him to negotiate and paste the poster. (Field Notes, Usilampatti, October 2014)

The symbolic investment undertaken by Thevars functions as a signifier of dominance or who controls public space. Locally powerful Thevar leaders take particular pains to decorate the important centres with their banners and posters. Such displays politicise Thevar GP and solidify a collective social identity.

Thevar GP and the Politics of Collective Identity

On October 25 2014, standing amid a posse of policemen and journalists, I was waiting for the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O. Panneer Selvam. He was expected to visit Madurai's Bank of India (Anna Nagar branch) in order to hand over the 13 kilogram golden armour to Gandhi Meenal (Muthuramalinga Thevar's niece and Trustee of the Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Trust) to adorn the Thevar statue at Pasumpon during Thevar GP.

Coming in a limited convoy the CM went inside the bank where Gandhi Meenal was waiting. After handing over the golden armour to the trustees he quickly left for Chennai avoiding the media. The golden armour with police protection was taken to Pasumpon. (Field Notes, Madurai, October 2014)

Though a recent development, this handing over of armour marks the official start of Thevar GP celebrations. It also signifies the political importance of the event as the CM creates space in his busy schedule just to hand over the armour. Taken from the party's resources, this gesture was at the height of the political symbolism invested by the Dravidian parties. It was a move to appease the Thevars, who have traditionally backed AIADMK, and also for recent measures to surveil and curtail the event. Significantly, this massive expenditure to pamper a particular community did not garner political

criticism except from the Dalit leader Krishnasamy, who questioned the selective appeasement. A few Thevar leaders also issued statements that the effort was a political gimmick but this was to shore up their own standing. This political gesture, in sum, demonstrates how much power the Thevars, who form just eight per cent of the total population, wield. Though donated by the party, since she held CM's office, it was popularly understood as a state gesture.

Following this complex enmeshment of politics and caste, I examined how Thevar community leaders gear up for the event. After booking an appointment with Murugan Ji, I travelled to his office in Usilampatti with a friend on a Sunday, just four days from Thevar Jayanthi and the road for much of the way was filled with posters and wall writings.

In his office we could see freshly printed posters of Murugan Ji with Bose's profile picture on the chest of his image [Figure 11], which indicates the devotion attached to the leader and a statement that he carries him inside his heart... He called one of his men and ordered them to paste the posters tonight around Usilampatti, Chekkanoorani and till Achampathu.



Figure 11. A Bharatiya FB poster featuring Murugan Ji.

Murugan Ji explained to us that they would go to Pasumpon from Usilampatti on the first day of the event itself and would be paying homage. 'We will go there in twenty vehicles, a lot of youth from Usilampatti Thevar College regularly accompany us and on 29th and 30th we will be organising events here in Usilampatti, which include garlanding the statues of Thevar and holding a public meeting, this year we are hoisting flags and organising *Annadhanam*.' (Field Notes, 26 October 2014)

Though he bemoaned the focus on sacralisation (see last chapter), he said that he had been offering hair at the Thevar temple since 1992. Murugan Ji, sports a saffron shawl and believes in Hindu nationalism. He asserted that since Thevar was a spiritualist who believed in Hindu principles and sympathised with hindutva ideologues M.S. Golwalkar and Veer Savarkar, a section of Thevars are affiliated with Hindu nationalism. He continued: 'I am one among them and believe that only the Hindu right can carry forward the legacy of Muthuramalinga Thevar'. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party has a minimal presence in Tamil Nadu, Thevar community members form an important cadre base for the party.

Later, we followed Murugan's convoy to Pasumpon village. En route we could see that there were fewer banners than previous years, as the Ramanathapuram district administration had imposed restrictions on their use and had earmarked zones following GP-related violence and loss of lives. In Pasumpon itself, a huge arch at the entrance erected in honour of Muthuramalinga Thevar was decorated with lights. The cadres of different Thevar outfits were busy getting wall paintings done and erecting flexboards. Members of *Mukkulathor Pulipadai* (Mukkulathor Tiger Force) were engaged in wall painting and we approached them to get an idea of how they perceive Thevar Jayanthi.

Pasumpon Raja, the local *Pulipadai* youth wing secretary, was overseeing the wall painting. He told me how difficult it is to get permission to erect flexboards and draw graffiti and the existing rule is to avoid any provocative language or sentiments that will affect the harmony. 'This was not the case five years ago there is a conspiracy to contain and suppress the Thevars, the British failed to do so and these parties will also realise that soon.' (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

Any repression or containment by the state evokes ire among the Thevars. Their subjection by the CTA during the colonial era is key to their collective memory. Thevars

have, though, resignified that suppression. The most common narrative states they were suppressed because they were posing a challenge to British colonialism. This is a recurring narrative across the community and translates into expressions of aggressive masculinity and self-pride, intended to show that the Thevars are a community which has historically controlled others and cannot be controlled. This resonates mostly at the level of discussions on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 (1995), which provides protection to Scheduled Castes (Dalits) from discrimination.⁴⁶ The Thevar leader Pasumpon Pandian of *Thevar Ina Padhugappu Peravai*, (Forum to Protect the Thevar Community) for example, told a meeting in Madurai on the unity of Tamil speaking castes (excluding the Scheduled Castes) that the SC/ST POA Act should be scrapped but stressed: ‘A law as draconian as the CT couldn’t do anything against the Thevars, what would this ... Act do.’ (Field Notes, October 2014)



Figure 12. Artists painting a wall for Thevar Jayanthi near the entrance of Pasumpon village.

Once in Pasumpon, we rode to Thevar’s memorial. We found municipality workers engaged in sprucing up the place for the celebrations. The Thevar auditorium was decorated and the whole area within about 3 kilometres had been cleaned and double barricading had been erected for a smooth darshan and the homage of Thevar’s devotees. We could hear people shouting tributes to Thevar.

⁴⁶ This meeting articulated intermediate caste fears of legal action against them. Despite its minimal rates of conviction the Act has instilled a sense of fear and insecurity among the dominant castes (Manor, 2012; Carswell and De Neve 2015).

As anticipated, Murugan Ji came in his convoy of SUVs and cars from Usilampatti. About 25 youth from Usilampatti owing allegiance to Murugan Ji, came with a relay torch voicing loud cheers for Muthuramalinga Thevar, Mookiah Thevar, Subash Bose, Murugan Ji and Thevar College in Usilampatti (as most were students of the College), and entered the memorial-turned-temple. Muthuramalinga Thevar, the presiding deity was twinkling in the golden armour. The youth, as per Hindu tradition, ran around the temple in a circular motion three times carrying the *jothi* (torch) and then handed it over to the temple priest, who received it from them and went to the deity and did *Deeparadhanai* (a Hindu traditional practice in which a camphor lit flame is waved around in a circle in front of the deity). ... Another priest came up with the prasadam and distributed it to the boys. (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

More like the traditional Brahminical temple style, the grave and deity's space functions here as sanctum sanctorum with steel-grilled barricades where only the priests can enter. The closest space for darshan is a foot away and this is where the VIPs stand. Then there is another layer of iron-grilled barricades, for all and sundry. The iron grills on the outer portion of the temple were designed with two peacocks on each side in honour of those belonging to Thevar.

Murugan Ji as soon as he entered the memorial went to the spot where people tonsure their hair (See figure 13) as a ritual of offering to the deity. He along with one of his assistants offered their hair, took baths and came to the temple along with the party's office bearers. As soon as they reached, one of his lieutenants in his high pitched voice shouted slogans and Murugan Ji followed. (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)



Figure 13. Bharatiya FB leader Muruganji of Usilampatti offering his hair, October 2014.

It is important to note that the use of slogans here departed from the usual behavior at temples and, in hailing the FB and its leaders, introduced politics into the sacral realm. This also highlights the dilemma of whether it is a memorial or a temple. This form of pledge-based worship could be seen as part of the subaltern forms of worship (Wagner, 2007: 151-152; Roy, 1998: 45-48), especially for Kali, the goddess of death. The cadres of Bharatiya FB could be seen raising slogans while some of the general public waited outside to get Darshan. Another important difference is the placing of wreaths rather than garlands. Navamani in an earlier interview recalled how Mookaiah Thevar used to come with fresh jasmine flowers and the petals of various flowers. The elders in the community insist on placing flowers and garlands and not wreaths, as it is a temple not a memorial. However, the popular practice is still to place wreaths and almost all of the political parties bring them to place upon the memorial.



Figure 14: The Golden armour cast statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar at his memorial-turned-temple in Pasumpon.

One woman who came to Pasumpon with her extended family likened the GP experience to a pilgrimage to one of the abodes of Lord Murugan. The Thevar GP, with

its rituals more or less in the agamic tradition, consolidates the interaction between the deified Thevar and his devotees through hymns, verses, religious discourses, devotional singing, *arathi* gestures, devotional coloured clothing (normally red and yellow which symbolises *shakthi* (power) and auspiciousness). In other words, the interface with the deity is not just facilitated and experienced through corporeal means but also through a whole range of sensory domains and artefacts. The priest acts as an interlocutor, conveying the animating power, offerings and *arathi* (ritual where circling of lit camphor on a plate is done to deities and humans) Filling the space with garlands and flowers, sacred ash, *kungumam*, and camphor flames provides the necessary sacral experience that we associate with gods.

The GP enables the enactment of both a corporeal and ocular experience. Saints of the Kamatchipuri Adheenam, pipe instrument players and the Mutt's puja committee members perform the rituals according to the Hindu Saivaite tradition. Pandian one of my interlocutors, and a journalist with the *Thevar Malar* magazine, informed me that this tradition has been practiced over the last 50 years. A consecration ceremony, which usually takes place once every 12 years, was also organised at the temple, informed the priest Sivalingeswarar. As the space embodies both a memorial and a temple, the sensory domains and artefacts are not purely sacral. For example, the most prominent soundscape was the beating of drums; every group that comes in a procession is accompanied by a troupe of parai drummers who are either paid or coerced by the Thevars to play for them and they normally do not enter the memorial. Once the crowds, who arrive in Pasumpon dancing to the drumbeats, enter the temple space their body language changes and they generally concentrate and pray to the deity, becoming keen to get his darshan. Carried away by the occasion there were exceptions; I could see youth clapping and whistling, which is definitely seen as less civilised and indecent inside a temple premise. It is the complexity of the structure as both a memorial and a temple that leads to the mix of devotees, caste members, and political entrepreneurs. Each has a specific performative quotient and a different perception of Muthuramalinga Thevar. He is a caste icon for some, a deity for others, and followers display their loyalties or attachments in corresponding religious, ideological, or cultural terms.



Figure 15: People gathered in front of the Muthuramalinga Thevar Memorial.

The Ritualisation of Thevar Guru Puja

Muthuramalinga Thevar's niece's son T.Pandian told me that since the memorial was consecrated following traditional Hindu rituals it qualifies as a temple.

During the early days, the GP was performed purely as a devotional service. In the year 2009, I provided a statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar in a seated position practicing meditation, the height of the statue was 3.5 feet and Thevar was 5.7 feet, the height of the grave was 2.2 feet so it totaled to 5.7 feet. So the deity was consecrated as per agamic traditions and the statue also possesses contents like *spadikam* (Quartz) so there is no need to adorn it with copper plates. (Interview with Pandian, Pasumpon, October 2014)

He described how people come in large numbers and offer prayers with belief; 'people's will is god's will,' he opined. I was also able to observe that there is a tendency to combine both ritualistic practices and devotional practices as part of the GP. The fact that he was a political and community leader, however, negates certain aspects of sacralisation and the political facet gains more weight as political figures from all hues, including the CM, regularly pay obeisance at his memorial.

On 28 October 2014, when we entered the memorial, *Ganapathy homam* (a religious ritual where offerings are poured into fire) was being performed as the initial steps of Puja. The family members of Thevar were tied with a protective amulet and Sivalingeswarar hoisted the religious flag and started the Latcharchanai festival, which runs for three days. In the evening, the *Vilakku Pujai* (Lamp Festival) was organised and many women and young girls participated with enthusiasm. Sivalingeswarar sang devotional songs hailing Lord Murugan and Thevar accompanied by the devotional music of the mutt's troupe, while his disciples performed the yagam. The priest who stays in Pasumpon and takes care of the temple performed prayers to Thevar as crowds from nearby villages and further afield started to arrive. One could also see the policemen on duty (mostly from the community and deployed to avoid trouble) receiving *darshan* and *prasadam* and sporting the sacred ash provided by the priest.



Figure 16: Crowds making their way to the memorial in Pasumpon.



Figure 17: A Thevar youth with sacred ash on his forehead and wearing a yellow coloured headband (denoting Thevar) jostling for space to seek darshan from the deity.

The religious aspects of the GP are certainly pronounced. GP committee members said that close to 500 people offered their hair. Mariselvi (28) of Mudukulathur was there at the *Mandapam* (Hall) where hair was being offered; she had come there to perform the first tonsuring of her one year old daughter (a ritual practiced by Hindus who have the first tonsuring as a vow to be fulfilled in a temple).

Mariselvi stated that ‘Thevar is our lineage god, though many of our relatives were not able to make it to Pasumpon because of the restrictions and there was a suggestion to change the date, we stood firm and told them that we are going to do it on Thevar Jayanthi and you can visit us later to see our daughter.’ Ramesh, a native of Pasumpon who currently lives in Ramanathapuram, was there with his newly born son and his wife to seek the blessings of Thevar. He seemed to be very devoted, ‘Thevar is not a political leader or a spiritual guru, for us we do not see any difference between him and Lord Murugan, he is our God’. (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

Although the established notion is that the Thevar GP is a highly masculinised festival, my ethnographic evidence and experiences in previous years suggest that women are participating in large numbers, albeit mostly on the first day (28 October). There could be several reasons why women participate more in commemorative festivals where there is an element of sacrality such as here. Pilgrimage is seen as a legitimate outing for women whose lives are otherwise restricted (Dubisch, 1995; Hirschon 1983; Mernissi,

1977). Religious festivals are replete with women devotees, and Thevar GP allows women to congregate together in huge numbers. Small rituals for women are also part of the event; for example, women can be found tying threads to a tree within the memorial. The vows could just be personal ones that need to be fulfilled, but the joint experience of hundreds of women carrying *mulaippari* (Sprouts) and milk pots together provides them with the psychophysiological dimensions of social cohesion.

Nabokov (2000), drawing upon Marshal Sahlins (1985), proposes that some Tamil rituals are ‘prescriptive’ and others are ‘performative’ as a useful distinction between two kinds of social structures. She says that the former follows explicit rules about who may do what and with whom and in the latter, people seem to be making up the rules as they go along (2000: 12): ‘So with Tamil rituals: some given participants have no other option but to comply with stated procedures and aims; others permit everyone to make their own performative and interpretative choices.’ In pace with Nabokov’s binary approach, I argue that the nature of the rituals associated with the Thevar GP is both prescriptive and performative. Traditions are followed that are similar to those associated with Lord Murugan’s congregations and are therefore prescriptive in nature but on the other hand, we can also see performative aspects where those congregated at Pasumpon script their own transformations. For example, the way that they move their bodies, with some dancing their way to Pasumpon, and the use of *parai* (impure cow-hide drum) drumming for processions rather than the traditional temple *melam*.

Villagers and community members as devotees come to Pasumpon to fulfill vows, to take darshan, to pray, or to experience the festivity and dance to the accompaniment of drum beats as the occasion provides a blended experience of religiosity and cultural meaning. There are instances of frantic agitation, passionate enthusiasm, and ecstatic self-absorption. More in line with the folk rituals, one can see the incorporation of the supernatural into the human body as devotees enact possession at the temple. Those who are possessed infuse their possessing deities and demons with their own personality and emotional dilemmas.

Standing in the queue to get Thevar’s darshan, fifty year –old- Angammal, started

swinging her arms and legs and raised her voice to hail Thevar, the ladies who were in the queue, '*saami pudichiruchu*' (she's possessed by God) just hold her tightly. Unable to control Angammal the ladies tried hard but she kept swinging her arms continuously shouting that Thevar is going to come back soon. (Fieldnotes, October, 2014)

Possessions in the case of Thevar GP, as seen here, were more spontaneous than in other festivals. Kapadia (1995: 125) informs us that the religious discourse of the lower castes claims that 'Deity descends to possess those of the most humble caste because Deity is concerned not with any temporal purity hierarchy but rather with devotion, love, and purity of heart—values that the ideology of caste hierarchy entirely discounts.' Though Kapadia's work is related to Pallar women, Thevars as hierarchically low castes follow similar practices. Possessions and stories of seeing Thevar in dreams are commonly found in religious discourse and songs. For instance, Perumayi (70) of Sellur is a Thevar devotee who maintains the statue and performs pujas regularly. Pappathi and Karuppayi normally accompany her from Sellur. They all are in their 70s and each wears a yellow (auspicious) saree with a small dash of red. Perumayi is a groundnut seller who believes that Thevar is a reincarnation of Lord Murugan:

An almighty who is bigger to me than my children, one day a few years ago I came to visit the Government Hospital and during that time there was a lot of tension as someone had desecrated the Thevar statue, I started crying and couldn't console myself and later I went back to my shop and after a few minutes I saw Thevar appear in front of me, and since that day till now for almost 23 years I have been maintaining the Thevar statue, doing pujas on every Friday, cleaning the pedestal and doing *palabhishekham* (bathing the deity/idol in milk). And 48 days before Thevar GP (30 October) I perform the mandala puja. I will perform all these rituals till my last breath. Thevar is the god I worship, I am indebted to him because when I fell terribly sick a few years ago Thevar appeared in my dreams and cured my sickness. (Interview, October 2014)



Figure 18: A Thevar youth after performing milk abhishekam on the Thevar statue at Goripalayam in Madurai, 2014. Photo: K. Anthony Xavier ©

Perumayi cannot be missed if one frequents the Goripalayam junction. In 2008 and 2009, it was Perumayi who, while going to garland the Thevar statue, found that it had been smeared with cow dung and human waste. And whenever the statue is desecrated Madurai comes to a standstill following largescale protests. As the Thevar statue is a ritual spot holding almost an equal importance with Pasumpon, Perumayi is known to all the politicians who come to garland the Thevar statue. Whenever they come, Perumayi is there with her camphor lit puja plate filled with sacred ash and vermilion. The politicians rarely fail to provide *kaanikkai* (donations). Stories like hers, mythicise Thevar as a sacral phenomenon, given the tradition of worshipping small gods and hero-stone worship in place it is not unusual to hear such cases of sacralisation.



Figure 19: People thronging towards the Muthuramalinga Thevar statue with sprouts and milk pots to perform rituals on his birth anniversary in Madurai. A miniature statue of Thevar is carried along with Goddess Meenakshi the presiding deity of Madurai. Photo: K. Manikandan ©

The construction of Muthuramalinga Thevar as an icon travels a path from the material to the spiritual. It follows a mimetic process in which the ‘orientation of the mind’ moves ‘from the limited formal representation of iconicity to the absolute likeness of divine affinity’ (Douzinas, 2015: 820). A thin line separates the icon and the idol in the Tamil folk tradition. An extract from my fieldnotes highlights how Thevar has crossed this line as the expressive forms of veneration indicate.

The memorial, which has been turned into a shrine recently, could be seen thronging with people: devotees carrying milkpots, firepots, *Alagu Kuthuthal* (spear piercing) and *mudi kaanikkai* (offering hair) and growing sprouts and offering them. Muthuramalinga Thevar is believed to have embodied the greatest of human and almost divine qualities as he was deified after his demise. He stands as a presiding deity in a few village temples and is revered as a deity by most of the Thevars within their households, where his miniature statues are part of the pantheon of Hindu gods. (Field Notes, October 2015, Pasumpon)

We have already seen in the previous chapter (2) how Muthuramalinga Thevar himself is worshipped as the presiding deity with accompanying temple structures. In the picture above (figure 19), we can see how during the GP procession at Madurai a miniature statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar is taken along with the statue of Goddess Meenakshi. The key point here is how a sacral realm is built around a statue through highly effective

performative registers, thus providing both political and social dominance. In the following section, I discuss how Thevar GP provides a sense of collective identity.

The Collective Experience of Thevar Guru Puja

One of the common themes of Thevar GP was the stress on unity and solidarity. It was widely reiterated that: ‘We were Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars but in this sacred holy land of Pasumpon we got mingled as Thevars and shall remain as Thevars and will be with Thevar and live for Thevar’. Muthuramalinga Thevar remains a quintessential factor of integration. Thevar GP functions on an associationalism that works through cultural kinship-based caste networks and community organisation. It is the key commemoration for establishing the associationalism of the three castes. However, this assimilation is premised on the exclusion of others. The Thevar GP relies heavily on the construction of an imagined community in opposition to the Other. Because a community can be much more effectively defined in contradistinction to an Other, the event has ‘othered’ the Dalits not only in rhetorical terms but by making them an actual target. The commemoration acts as a strategic point to showcase strength and power through assertions of dominance over others. Commemorative events, such as Thevar GP, become avenues for strong resurgences of caste animosities and the temporary interiorisation of caste is made very visible here (Mosse, 2012).

In Thevar GP we find both production of locality (Appadurai, 1996) and the construction of the other. Locality here has to be understood both in terms of spatial and social practice. The GP as an event must be seen within globalisation induced changes - especially migration of rural population to bigger cities. Against this, it produces a sense of cultural solidarity and creates a ‘structure of feeling’ (Appadurai, 1996: 182) among the community, which brings back people scattered by migration in numbers larger than a Pongal (Harvest) festival. Here locality is also ritually produced; people tonsuring their heads, parents naming their children, men and women performing vows that would be fulfilled over time, these are some of the events that are termed complex social techniques by Appadurai, where locality is inscripted onto bodies and anonymous spaces are marked as significant, sacral places. These events are often used to

symbolically integrate the discrete action of various groups organised in the locality. For example, Alagarsamy (27) of Avaniapuram, who was at Pasumpon to pay homage along with his friends says:

There is no Deepavali for me it is Thevar Jayanthi, which is, more than Deepavali. You can see people celebrate Thevar Jayanthi with great pomp, festoons, crackers and you can hear songs blaring in so many villages and it is the biggest festival for Thevars. At Avaniapuram we used to celebrate the event with organising cultural and sports events, playing music and songs hailing Muthuramalinga Thevar and will distribute Pongal (sweet rice). (Field Notes, October 2014)

From Alagarsamy's account, one can infer the significance of Thevar GP. It has made him return from Tirupur, an industrial city in the western region, to join with the community. This sense of collectiveness through participation is important for our understanding as it is often connected to new developments in the institutionalisation and practice of community. Kinship (including fictitious kinship) structures are utilised to forge ties through the public expression of shared community identities. In relation to the Thevar GP, caste based social networks, community sabhas, and neighbourhoods were used to mobilise people. Activities centered around ceremonies, especially processions through various villages and towns of Pasumpon and Madurai city, and performances in urban and rural spaces. Freitag (1989) says that collective ceremony is the genre of public activity in which collective experience is the most regular, sustained and repetitive. As such, it can set the patterns, and often the symbolic rhetoric or vocabulary (1989: 25). Turner (1974) proposes that as they come together for collective observances, participants experience a liminal state. He calls this state 'communitas', that intervening liminal phase betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life. In his discussion on the interplay of caste and communitas at a pilgrimage in western India he shows us that in every society, communitas must stop short at the cultural boundaries imposed by the structure of social organisation. This, he elaborates, is in large part because the conditions leading to the experience of communitas can only occur where 'structure' organises to produce the liminal experience (Turner, 1974: 285).

Outside the liminal phase, fissures emerge. Thevar GP as a voluntary associational activity, is mired by the same cultural boundaries associated with rituals, region and also

icons belonging to their castes. Although Muthuramalinga Thevar was the central icon bridging the boundaries, the significance of caste icons was also emphasised on different occasions. As a sequential aspect of the *communitas*, processions were an integral part of the ritual. Youngsters in colourful uniform carrying torches in a procession is a key element.



Figure 20: Boys from Kottaimedu wearing Muthuramalinga Thevar and Subash Bose image imprinted T-shirts carrying torches towards the Thevar Memorial.

Close to a thousand women volunteers in their prominently visible yellow and red sarees carrying *mulaippari* went on a procession from Kottaimedu to Pasumpon. A song blaring from the publicly mounted speakers was singing Muthuramalinga Thevar's pride as the women were marching in unison and kids enthusiastically running around carrying the tiger symbol flags providing a spectacle for onlookers to watch and listen. (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

One of the most interesting features of the Thevar GP in terms of spectacle, was the rivalry among various leaders to showcase their strength. In 2014, the All India FB

leader B.T. Arasakumar's procession with a caparisoned elephant, carrying a garland for the Thevar statue received great attention.⁴⁷ To match this spectacle, the Appanadu Maravar Sangam youth leader Senthil used an elephant and organized a mulaippari and milk pot procession in Mudukulathur. In most cases, every group that undertakes a procession will try to strike a difference and a similarity, the former is to perform better with brighter colours or a louder troupe of dancers and drummers or anything to be more visible than the other group. The similarity here would be their attachment and devotion to the leader and the community. The intensity of visual signifiers and the display of power and cadre strength are evident in processions and the number of vehicles arranged for them, though restrictions have been placed on this. All these visual and material elements on display become part of the performative power associated with GP. The road becomes the stage and the processions become a symbol of authority, with cultural performances and martial displays displayed in a theatre of power. The audience here is three-fold: the state/political authority, the broader society of onlookers (in particular Dalits), and the Thevar community itself.

Though laced with devotional aspects, participants in the procession move with the understanding that they will be seen and are conscious of the fact that their movement is a demonstration of caste pride, power and authority. In sum, the procession functions in four ways: to see, to show, to be seen, and to cause to be seen. Amidst the competition, there were conscious attempts to strike a sense of uniformity in terms of displaying colours. Women can be seen wearing the same saree and men wear the same colour dress. This clearly had a visual and promotional function. For example, the T. Veppamkulam villagers came as a group:

A. Arjunan Municipal Chairman Rameswaram had sponsored the uniform for the youth and boys who were in a white T-Shirt and tracksuit pants with saffron borders, with an image of Muthuramalinga Thevar on the chest of the T-Shirt and his name as he was the sponsorer. Since the chairman is affiliated to AIADMK, all the women were given green colour sarees. All the boys were wearing their flag colour of yellow and green as bandanas and were dancing to

⁴⁷ It received widespread attention and invited legal action against him and the mahout who brought the elephant from Rajapalayam. Cases were filed against them under Sec 144 of CrPc for violating prohibitory orders, the mahout was arrested later. (*The Hindu*, 4, November 2014).

the tunes of windpipe and traditional drum players who they had hired for the GP event. (Field Notes, October 2014)

The cultural expression here offered the Thevars strong visibility and capital to engage in bargaining within the state's political realm. The symbolic martial rhetoric in place during the GP and the subsequent state patronage provides the Thevars with a form of ownership over a political language, which is then denied to other castes. Through the dense visual signifiers in major parts of the city the Thevars make it a 'representational space' as conceptualised by Lefebvre (1991). The struggle to gain command and control over social space he argues has become a central element of everyday life. This has created a situation where the spatial aspects of everyday power relations have become more tangible and therefore result in more frequent incidences of socio-political contestation (1991: 416). Notwithstanding the dominance expressed through these visual signifiers they also become markers as social/spatial boundaries, for example, the Goripalayam area where Thevar's statue is located is out of bounds for any form of visual signifier by Dalits. To cite an instance, a wall painting by VCK on the Government Hospital wall for the 'Salem Education Conference' was removed under the influence of local minister and when the cadres questioned it, a case was filed against VCK leader Thirumavalavan and state youth wing joint secretary D. Maalin and six others for defacing the wall of a government institution. The Dean of the Hospital confirmed to the VCK cadres that no wall painting would be allowed for any organisation, but during Thevar Jayanthi FB's painting carrying Kathiravan's name was allowed (Interview, Maalin, Madurai, November, 2014). Maalin said that twice in the past Thirumavalavan's banner was placed in Goripalayam and it was desecrated, first in 1998 it was smeared with cow dung and in 2007 a banner for Dalit Women's Rights Conference carrying his image was set on fire. He said that the police are conniving with the Thevars and are not allowing the Dalits to place any visual material within that space thus legitimising their control. This attitude is maintained by police in the state, for example recently in Ramanathapuram district, police banned and restricted Ambedkar jayanthi celebrations within Dalit villages, not allowing them to extend to common places (*The New Indian Express*, April, 14, 2017). The above said instances provide us

an idea how symbolism here affords control over public space by denying access or control to others.

Certainly, the most enduring aspect of Thevar GP is the formation of firm community bonds and community leadership. In terms of the latter, the festival may be transient but in most cases it becomes a vantage point for political prominence. The most successful case in the recent times was the emergence of Karunaas, who while acting in films tried his hand in community-based work, formed the *Mukkulathor Puli Padai*, and after a few visits to Pasumpon, a hair offering and a creation of few branches, has become an MLA (*The Hindu*, 2016). Karunaas is known for his highly emotional and provocative speeches laced with myths and glorifying. Within a short span of time he was able to carve out a political niche. Caste is an important organising principle in Tamil society and political entrepreneurs seize upon it, devising strategies to advance group interests, organizing campaigns, lobbying and gathering resources (Wyatt, 2010).

Mega Annadhanams as a Collective Ritual

The level of visibility provided by the GP, both at a political and a community level, means that political leaders and community heads use the occasion to carve out a name for themselves. Apart from the highly visible roadside markers, prominent community leaders erect huge pandals for common feasting where hundreds of people gather to have lunch. These pandals, wrapped with the colours of their caste organisation (see Figure 21), can host 300 people at a single time and serve food from 1 p.m. until 3 p.m. The bigger the pandal and the variety of meals, the more their status is enhanced within the community, as those partaking talk about the feast and carry those memories over the following years. Jeyapandi (37) from Kaalayarkoil near Sivaganga, who came out of Chittrarasu Thevar's pandal, said:

The food served here had all the ingredients you commonly find during marriage halls. The previous year I had the chance to eat food at Sridhar Vandayar's pandal, which was better than this time. But I have no complaints, it is not about the quality of the food being served, but the idea to serve food which is important. (Interview, Pasumpon, 30 October 2014)

The Annadhanams are a good example of how collective identities and memories get articulated as part of the evaluation and appreciation process. The food served, the processions, songs and music are often remarked upon by the participants. Based on a sense of commensality, these mega annadhanams are a strong collective ritual. Commonly practiced during marriages, where food is served in huge quantities to friends and relatives, these collective rituals promote cohesion among community members who hail from different parts of the state. Nabakov (2000: 15) states that Tamil rituals have a fragmentary nature as, ‘far from integrating or reintegrating people, it splits them apart’. She comprehends that those emerging from multiple ‘rituals and religious experiences ... is a compound of disparate identities that do not always blend very well.’ However, I argue that in the case of Thevar GP, the ritual elements not only integrate but also reintegrate disparate identities. This can be understood from what Valentine Daniel calls as the Tamil ways of coalescing through synthetic knowledge (1984: 233-237).



Figure 21: A Food Pandal (left) serving lunch in Pasumpon Village. A Flexboard of Sridhar Vandayar (right) welcoming people to Thevar Jayanthi and asking them to participate in the Annadhanam.

Community cohesions, however, needs to be constantly renewed and is always subject to negotiation. Ramasamy Thevar, who was overseeing proceedings in Pasumpon, was quite vocal that the Thevar GP should be more of a sacral experience. He opined that the political aspects of the event should be toned down. Whilst the sacral nature of event is clear, the centrality of politics is never far from view. One participant, Ramesh, got agitated when I asked about different GP events in Tamil Nadu: ‘There is no question of pitting or putting Thevar with other leaders, he was the one who gave us (Thevars) life,

he saved all of us from the CTA.’ Ramesh continued:

I do not think there is any leader in Tamil Nadu now who has not visited Pasumpon. Any leader who wishes to shine and do well in politics will definitely visit Pasumpon and one who wishes to gain proximity to Mukkulathors always used to visit Pasumpon. They cannot afford to lose that. They are coming, they will come and they have to come, there is no other way. (Interview, October 2014)

This highlights how most Thevars see Muthuramalinga Thevar as a revered figure, a sacral entity and above all as a deity. They are ambivalent about the political aspects, even as they revel in the fact that he is a powerful political icon. It is the political centrality of the Thevar icon that reproduces Thevar dominance, and makes it visible through visual culture and aggressive mobilisation. Ramesh’s observation that he would remain a figure who cannot be ignored in Tamil politics is apt.

Conclusion

This ethnographic account of Thevar GP showcases the multiple sites for the enactment of a caste collective. The flexboards, the colours of clothing, wall paintings, and other aural signifiers and related paraphernalia tangibly present in the celebratory events indicate various political and social agendas. The event consists of a series of religious discourses centred on deifying Thevar: the lamp festival, groups performing songs and drama, martial displays and parades, debate speeches and songs played and broadcast through loud speakers. It is a mixture of audio-visual mediums, which attracts many people. Though the Puja produces elements of sacralisation, the first two days are officially designed to be sacral and spiritual and the last day is for the political parties to pay homage. So these three days of the GP showcase the traversal of the icon between the political and deified presence.

Thinking through the audience of these pujas gives us an understanding of the performance and the power embedded within it. Thevar GP with its demarcation on caste terms is central in the identity making of the community. The performative bodily acts and the aural-visual grammar that is articulated in these contested spaces render

embedded power relations visible. As the festival gained momentum and visibility through its politicisation, state recognition and endorsement followed. Though several respondents emphasised the sacral dimensions of Thevar Puja, we saw how the political aspects were ever-present. As Thevar events have gained prominence they have been echoed, on a slightly smaller scale, by Dalit groups seeking to assert themselves and challenge the dominance of the Thevars. In the past three decades, Immanuel has emerged as a countertype to Muthuramalinga Thevar. Alagarsamy (27), said, ‘they (the Dalits) celebrate their Jayanthi (Immanuel), we celebrate ours, it is a few individuals who create all these troubles and because of that the whole community gets affected.’ If only it was this simple. What we have witnessed instead, is the entrenchment of caste identities and forms of mobilisation that has resulted in violence between the two groups and led to increased state surveillance and intervention. It is to an examination of Immanuel as a Dalit icon that we now turn.

CHAPTER SIX:

Immanuel Sekaran as a Counter Symbol

Introduction

On 11th September 2014, it was the occasion of Immanuel's Guru Pujā in Paramakudi town in Ramanathapuram District, Southern Tamil Nadu. As I walked down the main road, an image of Immanuel sitting cross-legged on a huge chair overwhelmingly marked the landscape. This image, as I will show, is an integral part of Dalit iconography in the state's southern districts. Immanuel is celebrated as the first anti-caste martyr of the post-colonial era in Tamil Nadu, and he has emerged as a strong symbol of resistance against caste domination. Immanuel is revered for protecting the interests of Dalits and other working class groups and for sacrificing his life in the process, earning the sobriquet *Thiagi* (Martyr). Although he was killed in 1957, he only gained prominence as an anti-caste symbol across southern Tamil Nadu in the late 1980s and 90s. Through an array of signifiers and other forms of visual culture, Immanuel is revered by the Pallars and seen as a counter-symbol in relation to the dominant image of Muthuramalinga Thevar. Given the history of antagonism between the Pallars and Thevars, the emergence of Immanuel is crucial to understanding the nature of politics practised in southern Tamil Nadu, which, since the 1980s and early 1990s, have taken a visual turn. Within this context, the materialisation of Immanuel's iconography shows how socio-political norms are being reworked by the Dalits as a form of dissent.

Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I examine the construction of Immanuel's iconicity. I draw upon primary visual, textual and aural materials, including photographs, pamphlets, wall posters, billboards and folk songs mostly in the Tamil language. The Immanuel icon provides an interesting vantage point to understand Dalit, and particularly Pallar, challenges and the collective aspirations of a community with a history of challenging the dominant caste in the region. To substantiate my arguments, I have had conversations with members of

the community and various leaders and will be using firsthand observation of the aesthetic context for analysis. An analysis of the images themselves, their circulation within the community and in other larger domains, and the premise under which they are circulated will be key here. By looking at the various aspects of the visual culture I seek to define the construction of Immanuel as a counter symbol of oppressed castes and understand how the icon contributes to the counter-symbolic form of discourse.

After an introduction to literature on counter-symbols, I look first at how Immanuel as an icon facilitates a counter symbolic articulation of collective resistance and secondly, I explore how Immanuel is constructed as an icon. I will conclude with what the icon's cultural and political significance is in the given context by discussing the reception of the icon. Spatio-temporal aspects of the iconisation of Immanuel within the existing cultural realm, which is dominated by Dravidian iconography and the iconography of Thevar (see chapters 4 and 5), will be discussed. The analysis will tease out the specific role of the Immanuel iconography in the negotiation of public memory, social identity, and larger political assertion. As discussed in the literature in Chapter 2, the location of the icon and the forms of attachment to the icon are key aspects in its construction and reception, so it is necessary to discuss them. Drawing upon Panofsky's iconographical interpretation, I examine the construction, dissemination and reception of the icon. I will not, though, discuss the technical aspects of the iconisation in detail, but will focus on the materiality and how the sensorial experiences influence the social landscape, socio-political and cultural realities and identity formation. Following Olesen I dissect the interaction between biographical elements, key agents and audience in the creation of iconicity. As part of this, I address how different organisations in the process of iconisation portray, interpret and publicise Immanuel's achievements. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the literature that defines the symbolisation and spatialisation processes in the construction of socio-political icons.

Injustice Symbol, Subaltern Counterpublics and Counter-spatial Symbolism

Thomas Olesen (2015: 1) coined the term 'injustice symbol' to 'refer to events and situations that involve perceived moral and political transgressions and have motivated

debates about collective perceptions of right and wrong.’ He continues further, ‘Injustice symbols typically spring from events or situations where authority has been exercised in ways considered unjust by a collective and where a relatively clear victim-perpetrator relationship has emerged.’ This is of particular relevance here because Olesen looks at political icons within the realm of justice/injustice and discusses how iconic construction takes place. Talking about political iconography, he says,

What sets icons apart from ‘normal’ political actors is the example and drama of their lives. Personal sacrifice is a central element in this drama. So strong is their commitment to the pursuit of justice that they are willing to risk life. (2015: 43)

This aspect of sacrifice, which prioritises one’s intense commitment to values more than one’s own life, catapults a person into becoming an instrument for a higher cause and it is here that the ‘individual gets erased and a personae or symbol emerges instead’ (43). Following Olesen, this chapter will elucidate how symbols are created through and in social movements and how the element of sacrifice is crucial within the iconicity. Now let us turn our attention towards how members of the subaltern populace engage in the production of a counter-symbol as an alternative discourse against dominance. This is pertinent to understand the iconic construction under study as it is influenced by the idea to counter dominance.

According to Nancy Fraser (1992: 123), the subaltern population carves out its own space for resistance in order to challenge the dominant practices of the society:

History records that members of subordinated social groups -women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians - have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses ... The proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies.

Taking Fraser’s argument forward, Kohn (2001: 507) says,

To be effective politically a subaltern counterpublic must be a space where groups can develop the resources to present a consistent challenge to dominant practices ... It must provide at least temporarily a space protected from the dominant discourse in which an alternative can be imagined, lived and articulated.

As we will be discussing caste-stratified society, it becomes important to place the struggle of our subaltern Pallar group within this framework of subaltern counterpublics. An oppressive hierarchical social order grants unequal access to public space and thus necessitates the creation of subaltern counterpublics. In this context, I argue that through the erection of statues and investment in other symbolic forms, which I call counter-spatial symbolism, the underprivileged Dalits form a parallel discursive arena that is akin to subaltern counterpublics.

Perspectives on space explain the possible connections between everyday life experiences and broader socio-political and economic processes. This helps us to understand how the constitution of space influences and shapes collective action. Space, according to Lefebvre, is produced through social relations and structures and forms a fundamental part of all social life, both affecting and affected by social action (Lefebvre, 1991: 14–16; 280–283). Lefebvre's discussion of everyday practices is useful in understanding the complexities of marginalisation in public spaces. The struggle to gain command and control over social space, he argues, has become a central element of everyday life, and this has created a situation where the spatial aspects of everyday power relations have become more tangible, thereby resulting in more frequent incidences of sociopolitical contestation (Lefebvre, 1991: 416). Crucial to these aspects of space are the relationships between space, power and identity.

It is also important to note how these are mediated by symbols. According to Monnet (2011: 1),

A symbol is a concrete reality (a building, a statue, a coin, etc.) that communicates something intangible (an idea, a value, a feeling): consequently, a place of power is by definition a symbolic place, which is a vehicle for power in the spatial order and for space in the order of power.

The context in which these symbolic mediations emerge is critical to the understanding of the order of power embedded within it. A place accrues a certain meaning in relation to a group of individuals if it contributes in a way that provides an identity to the group (Monnet, 2011: 1-2). Groups and individuals, Monnet asserts, use 'different symbols in

order to produce symbolic places; symbols are also used to influence the construction of collective identities, and to legitimise the exercise of an authority.’ Public space plays a ‘determining role in the symbolic efficacy of a place.’ Public space functions both as a space of freedom and also a space of ‘public constraint’ and exclusion (2011: 4-5). To extend our understanding of how exclusion takes place in a public space, we can use Kaviraj’s (1997) exploration of the contested nature of public space in a park in Calcutta. He analyses how different conceptions of the ‘public’ are mapped on to the uses of common space in a highly stratified culture. He says that the idea of universal access to public spaces eludes Indian social and cultural life, wherein one’s social attributes determine one’s level of access to hierarchical spaces (1997: 90). Given this social context, the emergence of Dalit politics and the efforts to change the landscape through symbolism, especially in public spaces where they have been hitherto denied permission, is a counter narrative.

Before exploring Immanuel as a counter symbol, it is important to understand how Ambedkar-centred Dalit political symbolism emerged as new form of political identity that gave meaning and shape to Dalit politics across India. Ambedkar stands as a precedent in terms of subaltern assertion at a pan-Indian level and as I will show, the iconography of Immanuel follows the Ambedkar model. Though a contemporary of Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar remained a marginalised figure and it was only in the 1990s, three decades after his death, that he gained prominence on the national scene. This period saw the emergence of Dalit movements and a proliferation of Ambedkar statues across the nation, to the point where his statues outnumber those of any other leader in Indian history (Shourie, 1997: 10).⁴⁸ Nair (1994) says that the new trend of erecting statues of Ambedkar in public spaces in cities and villages symbolises self-assertion on the part of Dalits. This assertion signaled the formation of a new political identity with Ambedkar’s statue as a new deity on the horizons of modern urban spaces. The process of Ambedkarisation, especially since 1990 (his centenary year), has also

⁴⁸ The Hindutva-inclined writer Arun Shourie, in a rhetoric of intolerance, talks about Ambedkar and his statues outnumbering even those of Gandhi in his book *Worshipping False Gods* (1997). Many later writers have cited this.

seen street and estate names, portraits, murals, posters and plaques pay homage to him across India (Karthikeyan and Gorringer, 2012).

In a situation where there is high poverty and illiteracy, symbols have an extensive political purchase and reach. Ambedkar statues are largely erected by Dalits, and the form the statues have taken is significant. The public iconography found in statues, murals and posters carries a certain uniformity; Ambedkar is portrayed as a bespectacled man in a formal business suit, generally blue, with one or several fountain pens in his pockets, a book in his hand (usually the Indian Constitution), and his right arm raised in a teaching gesture (Jaoul, 2006; Tartakov, 2008). According to the ‘canons of tradition and history, however, this man was not supposed to wear a suit of any kind’ (Guha, 2002). By memorialising him in a suit, the Dalits are celebrating his successful storming of an upper-caste citadel. This element of his iconography is a crucial reference point for the recent Tamil blockbuster *Kabali* which touches upon these iconic modalities, as I will demonstrate later (Karthikeyan, 2016).

Tartakov (2008) states that Ambedkar’s iconography in the form of statues plays a very important role in the cultural and political life of Dalits. Likewise Jaoul (2006) argues that Ambedkar as a symbol of the Dalit struggle has profound political implications and has helped to promote ideals of and aspirations towards citizenship among the most marginalised. The Dalit struggle to insert ‘their’ iconic symbol into public spaces, he notes (2006: 175), is ‘the focal point for renewed aspirations towards democracy and important assertions of Dalits’ acceptance within wider society’. In terms of their functionality, Ambedkar statues go beyond mere symbolic purchase, the very act of their establishment represents a claim over public space when the central theme of oppression has been to exclude them, both in rural and urban worlds.

Symbolic politics, as observed by Rao, are a crucial axis of political subject formation, and are thus intimately but not wholly connected with the marginalised position of Dalits and their exclusion from sites of social production. According to Rao (2009: 183),

Ambedkar statues have played a crucial role in the constitution of a Dalit popular. At stake is Ambedkar's singular individuality, the agentive power of self-determination to remake the Dalit self, and thereby challenge the social invisibility and humiliation to which the community was relegated ... Commemorative political symbology—flags, statues, the politics of naming, and other practices of cultural production—constitutes the memory work facilitating the emergence of a new community identity.

It should be noted here that the landscape of Southern Tamil Nadu has been constructed as a 'metonymic extension of the caste identity of Thevars' (Krishnan, 2009). In South Tamil Nadu's nine districts with the lone exception of Kanyakumari, the Thevars are thickly populated and politically dominant. Against this backdrop, the emergence and insertion into public space of a Dalit generates and projects a new cultural message of resistance. Immanuel here is used to define group identity both for the group he represents and externally, in relation to other groups. As we will see, people with little in common can feel as though they share an identity through this counter-spatial symbolism. In the following pages, I will discuss how Immanuel as a local Dalit icon fits into the political discourse of the Dalits. Whilst the icon draws on and represents specific caste dynamics, there is an echo here of wider processes. Alexander et al. (2012: 5), thus, note how Che Guevara's iconography works in a dual way; it not only symbolised (and symbolises) revolution but also evolved as a 'powerful aesthetic embodiment working to bring it about.' Whilst it was reasoned that the death of Che might prevent revolution, therefore, it did nothing to 'inhibit the expansive iconic representation of revolution in Che's material form; in fact, it did everything to inspire it' (Alexander et al, 2012: 5). The case of Immanuel is similar to that of Che, albeit on a smaller scale; now dead, he has grown into multiple forms. An expansive iconic representation has been made possible a few decades after his death through various forms of iconography coinciding with Dalit assertion. We must start, though, with Immanuel's place in the annals of Dalit history in Tamil Nadu.

The Life and Times of Immanuel Sekaran

Immanuel Sekaran was born on 9th October 1924 in Sellur village in Mudukulathur Taluk, Ramanathapuram district, to a family of Christian Congress supporters. His

father Vedhanayagam used to take the young Immanuel to various meetings and protests, and it is probable that this instilled political consciousness in Immanuel. After finishing high school, he joined the army as a Havildar and during this time he used to visit his village on leave. On these visits home, he is said to have witnessed, and been outraged by, the horrors of caste atrocities and discrimination. He decided to quit his job and remained in his village to mobilise the Dalits to fight against the injustices committed against them (Alex, 1995; Tamilavel, 2003; Vijaya Dhanusu, 2011).⁴⁹

In villages there exists a sense of respect and fear for the *Pattalathukaran* (Military Man).⁵⁰ Immanuel, who had returned from the army, put that image to good use and started questioning the atrocities and discrimination, mobilising the Dalits against them. Ramanathapuram, which has a notorious history of caste-based atrocities and discrimination, was subject to a reign of terror under Thevar dominance (see Chapter 3). Continuing with the Christian tradition and his association with Perumal Peter (a Dalit Christian activist), Immanuel became the secretary of the Tamil Nadu Evangelical Lutheran Christian Union, working for the uplift of Dalit Christians in the Virudhunagar and Ramanathapuram regions. Immanuel's religious identity as a Christian is important, as is always used to contest the commemorations accorded to him by opponents. He was, however, also active in wider political spheres. In 1953, he assumed leadership of the Mudukulathur branch of the Depressed Classes League, a pan Indian movement created by the Congress in 1935 with provincial and regional level branches. Through his sustained efforts against practices like the double tumbler system⁵¹ he became prominent in the Ramanathapuram region. (Alex, 1995; Tamilavel, 2003; Vijayadhanusu, 2011)

⁴⁹ There is no official biography of Immanuel and most of the materials available are secondary sources. Some accounts can be very politicised and I have chosen to avoid their information.

⁵⁰ In the Tamil context, it is commonly believed in rural areas that a person who returns from military service will be more disciplined and aggressive, so there is fear and respect. This idea or belief has been visually represented in films, where the military man is shown as a highly masculine, aggressive but just person who invites respect and fear (See Kaali, 2000) In the case of Dalits, military service provided them with a moral economy to rework the social within the native villages like wearing boots and sporting big moustaches but has often invited the wrath of dominant castes (See Nair, 1998; Rajangam, 2016).

⁵¹ Driven by the fear of pollution, a lot of teashops in rural Tamil Nadu keep two separate tumblers for caste Hindus and Dalits. This severe form of untouchability is still widely practised despite a Constitutional ban (Carswell, G and Neve Geert De. (2014).

Immanuel took particular efforts to abolish and prevent the Dalits from engaging in jobs that were considered stigmatised. For example, there was a tradition in Ramnad district that the Pallar women should perform *oppari* (a funeral lament), where they sit around together and beat their chests at the funerals of upper castes. The women would be given wages for such a task and it was referred to as *Koolikku Maaradippadhu* (chest beating and lamenting for wages). The term became one to denote poverty or a situation of squalor and carries a derogatory connotation. Immanuel fought against this custom vehemently. There was also a practice among Dalits in the villages in Ramnad that if a dispute occurred among them or within their families they would beg Thevar men to solve the disagreement. Immanuel propagated against this practice and made the Dalits abstain from doing it, asking them instead to resolve issues among themselves through redressal forums. Though Immanuel was in the Congress party he was largely influenced by Ambedkar's ideology and when he passed away in 1956 Immanuel organised a meeting in Paramakudi to condole his death. Within the Congress party Kakkan (a former Home Minister in Kamaraj's cabinet) groomed him and planned to make him a MLA (Thangaraj, 1983: 17-19; Ravanani, 2008: 5-6; Tamilavel, 2003: 112-116).



Figure 22. A huge banner of Immanuel Sekaran in his military outfit was placed on the Paramakudi Main Road on the occasion of his GP.

As seen in Chapter 4, Thevar in the 1957 general election, won both MP and MLA seats defeating the Nadar dominated Congress. During this time, the Dalits had voted for Congress owing to the latter's efforts to address issues of untouchability and discrimination and also because of leaders like Kakkan representing the community. Thevar resigned as MLA keeping the MP seat and a by-election was held. His candidate, Sasivarna Thevar won, but the Thevars came to know that the Dalits in the constituency had expressed their loyalty towards Congress and this angered Muthuramalinga Thevar, revealing his loosening grip over Dalits (Hardgrave, 1969: 225). Following the elections, animosity between the Thevars and Dalits increased and multiple violent attacks were reported. It was against this backdrop that Immanuel emerged as a young Dalit leader.

C.V.R. Panikkar, the then District Collector of Ramanathapuram, called for a peace conference in Mudukulathur to ease the situation. The meeting was held at Mudukulathur Taluk office on 10th September 1957. According to Panikkar,

We got information that in Mudukulathur area there was unrest among the Maravars (Thevars) and Harijans and after discussing with the police and revenue officials I decided to organise a peace conference on September 10, 1957, letters were sent to MLAs MPs and other important leaders in the area. Muthuramalinga Thevar participated, I asked him to utilise his influence in the region and pave way for peace. On seeing Thevar enter the Hall, all the Harijans stood up and addressed as *Ejaman* (Lord), Immanuel did not stand up and address him as *Ejaman*. There was chaos and the members who came for the meeting started to function as three groups (Harijans, Nadars and Thevars), and each started accusing the other for the disturbances, and after a while everyone resolved to print and issue handbills demanding people to maintain peace. Intervening on this, Thevar said that, there is no point in issuing handbills as Harijans cannot read, I heard Immanuel respond that compared to the Thevars, many Harijans can read and write. Then Thevar refused to sign along with Immanuel stating that it would mean recognising Immanuel as a leader of the Harijans. Immanuel responded by stating that though he may not be as big a leader as Thevar but he too is accepted as a leader by a few and insisted to sign in the pact, Thevar staunchly refused but after insistence he signed separately and left the office. (Marudhayya Report, 1957; Dinamani, 3-9-1958)

The next day, Immanuel was found murdered near the Paramakudi bus stand. It was alleged that, after the peace meeting, an angry Thevar had said to his men that, ‘Pallans like Immanuel have started to speak against me and you guys are silently witnessing them,’ (Hardgrave, 1969: 226-227; Tamilavel, 2003). Forty-two Dalits were killed in the clashes that followed.⁵² These came to be known as the Mudukulathur riots in Ramanathapuram district. Considered as one of the worst caste clashes in the post-colonial period, they marked a new phase in the struggles against caste-based oppression (*Indian Express*, 3, September 1958).

The Scheduled Castes Federation and Republican Party of India organised condemnation meetings in Chennai, North Arcot and Chengalpet districts deploring the murder of Immanuel and the Mudukulathur riots. Almost all the prominent leaders, including the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Jagjivan Ram and E.V.R. Periyar condemned the riots. Many meetings were also held in southern districts to denounce the murder; Congress leaders and leaders from the Scheduled castes participated and warned that if the government failed to prevent such caste atrocities there would be further riots (Thangaraj, 1983: 22-23). P. Chandrabose, founder of Thiagi Immanuel Peravai (TIP), reflected on the impact and aftermath of Immanuel’s death and the social changes that were brought about by his murder in an interview:

Congress leaders R.S. Arumugam and P. Marudhayya and members of the community gathered in Paramakudi and observed Immanuel’s death anniversary in 1958. However, after that, Immanuel’s brother V. Durairaj joined FB and, due to pressure from Thevars, they stopped observing his death anniversary. Nevertheless, following the rise of Immanuel, a significant social change in the form of opposition to caste oppression by low caste and untouchable (Dalit) workers did occur, especially in southern districts and also through the Left Movement in Thanjavur district, in Tamil Nadu. This Dalit uprising, fueled by the rise of Immanuel, resulted in a raised level of consciousness among the Dalits, who utilised the available opportunities in the government sector through reservation policy. Migration to greener pastures and returning back to their villages and making investments in agriculture strengthened their economic base, which eventually resulted in changing power

⁵² Home Minister M. Bhaktavatsalam announced the number of deaths that were officially recorded in the State Assembly. He stated that 17 Dalits and 8 Thevars were killed in clashes and 13 Thevars were killed under police fire. Independent fact finding reports, however, put the number of Dalit deaths at 42 (Marudhayya Report, 1957). In addition, more than 2,370 houses of Dalits and 100 houses of Thevars were burnt down (*Indian Express*, 27 October 1957).

relations and forms of assertion on the part of Dalits. This changing configuration of power relations resulted in a series of clashes involving Dalits and the dominant castes in the southern districts from the 1960s till the mid 1990s. (Interview with P. Chandrabose, Paramakudi, September 2014)

Apart from a few references in books published in the 1980s about his struggles against caste discrimination and subsequent murder, there is not much information available about Immanuel's immediate legacy. Most of my elderly interlocutors blamed the decline of Congress and emergence of Dravidian parties for his fading from public memory. The late 1980s was a significant era in the history of Dalit assertion in Tamil Nadu, it was the time when Dalits in southern Tamil Nadu started involving themselves in the symbolic investment of a counter narrative, especially in relation to the assertion of the Thevars. Both Immanuel and Ambedkar feature as significant icons within this. Let us now look at the emergence and trajectory of Immanuel as a counter symbol.

The Iconic Construction of Immanuel as a Counter Symbol

The history of the iconic construction of Immanuel is quite fragmented. Although the memory of his sacrifice remained and commemoration events were held on the first anniversary of his death, it was not immediately institutionalised through remembrance practices or even through tangible forms of representation. As I will show in this section, it was a theological enterprise that brought him back into public memory through a carefully orchestrated iconic construction for a political purpose. The fact that Immanuel was a young *pattalathukaraan* (military man) has added a strong masculine dimension to his iconic construction (see Figure 22 above). The process has also involved a great amount of myth making. For example, describing Immanuel's physical appearance, Thangaraj (1983: 18-19) writes that he had

a daring physical appearance that would make the enemies run for cover. In army service he underwent proper training for wrestling and judo. Immanuel had the practice of carrying knives hidden inside his boots when going out and on any given day he had the power and strength of individually fighting against 8 men.

He goes on to explain how Immanuel used to train youngsters in silambam, judo, wrestling and sword fighting and created a youth force that would prevent atrocities.

These references to his masculine power and tales of his gruesome murder committed by close to ten men mythicised him as a folk hero, a martyr who laid down his life against injustice. In the previous chapter, we saw how the observations of political or social contemporaries are an important feature in the construction of an icon, adding legitimacy to the end product. In the case of Immanuel, there is not much about him from his contemporaries, however there is an important observation made by DMK founder C.N. Annadurai (who later rose to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu). On 30th October 1957, speaking on the motion expressing want of confidence in the Ministry following the Ramanathapuram disturbances, C.N. Annadurai stated that

Immanuel Sekaran has not only martyred himself for the upliftment of Adi Dravidars but for the whole of Tamil Nadu. Immanuel is not only a brave hero of Ramanathapuram region but a hero the whole world should be made to remember proudly. We have lost a martyr who sacrificed his life for the cause of people's unity. His name should be cast in the annals of the country's history. How Muthuramalinga Thevar was functioning as the leader of the Maravas, Immanuel functioned as the leader of the Adi Dravidars and the whole ministry knows it and so does the state. (Madras Legislative Council Debates, 1957)

Apart from this particular reference from Annadurai at that time, there were no conscientious efforts from the major political leaders or parties to politicise his death. Even the Congress party failed to recognise his labours, unlike with Muthuramalinga Thevar (as we have seen in the previous chapters), where there were competitive efforts to appropriate him. In Immanuel's case apart from the Dalit parties, and the lone exception of the PMK, there was no effort to iconise him. All the statues of Immanuel have been installed by Dalits and not by the government. The only attempt at official remembrance came in the form of a commemorative five-rupee postal stamp released by the Congress government in 2010.⁵³

Alongside Dalit parties, the role of theological enterprise in the iconic construction of Immanuel is an interesting one. It has been dubbed as caste-political exigency by Mosse (2014) in his study of the engagement of Roman Catholic institutions with Dalit politics.

⁵³ The stamp can be seen on the Indian government's postage stamp website: <http://postagestamps.gov.in/Stamps2010.aspx> (accessed on 30 June 2017).

In this case study, the Madurai based Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS) was initially the most prominent player. Daniel Gnanasekaran (referred to as Dalit Gnanasekaran), founder of the Dalit Liberation Movement, was one among the key figures to have brought Immanuel into the limelight. Based in Madurai at the TTS in the 1980s, Gnanasekaran was actively involved in Dalit politics and worked closely with the Dalit Panthers of India, including A. Malaichamy, and other Dalit leaders based in Madurai. Now relocated to Tiruvannamalai in Northern Tamil Nadu, I met him one Sunday for an interview and he recounted his involvement in the iconic construction of Immanuel; it was Daniel who discovered the grave of Immanuel in Paramakudi and shaped it.

In 1987, we first went to Paramakudi and identified the grave of Immanuel. As it was an isolated place with shrubs and other wild growth, we had difficulty in finding the grave but finally we found it and cleaned the place. Nobody actually bothered about the grave and it was not maintained properly. We then immediately made a stone plaque inscribing the details of who Immanuel was and what he did for the community. Former Congress MP and a then prominent Dalit leader, L. Elayaperumal was invited for the inauguration of the stone plaque. (Interview with Gnanasekaran, Tiruvannamalai, August 2015)

When asked about the need to iconise Immanuel, Gnanasekaran said,

During 1987 in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, there was huge violence over demands for reservation by the Vanniars (known popularly as the Vanniar Agitation). A lot of Dalit households came under attack and there was major violence. I was then the state youth wing secretary of Ilayaperumal's party. He was then the most prominent leader representing the Dalits. It was also the time when the Vanniar based PMK's Ramadoss was trying to make inroads in the south, playing the caste card that Pallis (Vanniars) and Pallars are one and the same. However, we were trying to build a broader platform by bringing all the castes under the Scheduled Castes category as a collective with an emphasis on larger unity among the Paraiyars and Pallars. Immanuel was a great leader who had sacrificed his life for the cause of the liberation of Dalits. In order to create unity among the Pallars and Paraiyars, a torch rally from Paramakudi to Madras was organised. Ilayaperumal who hails from the Paraiyar community was highlighting the sacrifices of Immanuel who was from the Pallar community. Nobody knew about Immanuel's image then, while we were searching about him we found a group photo of him from his home in Sellur. We placed requests, cajoled his family members and got the photo and used it to draw an image. S.P. Raj, an artist from Sivakasi who was also a Dalit leader and activist, painted his image. We both sat together on a night and completed the painting on a large cut out to take it along to the torch rally. So Immanuel's image as a large cutout was mounted on the top of a van and that led the torch rally. It was

dubbed as *Maaveeran Immanuel Sekaran Jothi*, (Torch of the Great Warrior Immanuel Sekaran). (Tiruvannamalai, August 2015)

In a larger sense, the role of TTS and the efforts of Gnanasekaran tell us how Immanuel, though depicted as a historical rebel figure, was originally confined within the local histories of Ramanathapuram district and as a hero for a particular community, but was retrieved and made a hero among all the oppressed sections of Tamil Nadu. The campaign of TTS in the late 1980s and early 2000s, introduced Immanuel as the central figure around whom all the oppressed sections could rally and assert themselves. Former TTS principal, Mohan Larbeer also endorsed the efforts of Daniel Gnanasekaran. He has described him as the first person to access the image of Immanuel and make it available to the public, until then no one knew what Immanuel looked like (Ravanan, 2008). Extending beyond the visual, TTS's musical troupe composed and sang songs on Immanuel too. All these actions, according to both Gnanasekaran and Larbeer, introduced Immanuel to the oppressed and identified him a leading figure (Ravanan, 2008). The role of TTS is important for our understanding of political entrepreneurship. Driven by the idea of consolidating the castes within the Scheduled Caste category, TTS and Scheduled Castes Liberation Movement (SCALM) utilised the possibilities of caste as a form of political identity through the iconisation of a sympathetic figure as seen in the plaque marking his grave (see Figure 23). It reads,

During his struggles against untouchability Immanuel gave up his life on September 11, 1957, shedding blood for the cause of liberation ... His martyrdom was both for the liberation and unity of the scheduled castes. Immanuel's torch relay was carried from Paramakudi to Chennai on August 8, 1988 for the SCALM conference held on August 21, 1988 at Madras (Chennai). The jothi (torch) was inaugurated by former MP, L. Elayaperumal, President, SCALM. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2014)



Figure 23. A stone plaque installed by SCALM in memory of Immanuel at Paramakudi.

The next important agent in the iconic construction is P. Chandrabose. Based in Paramakudi, he started his political career as a Naxalite sympathiser in the late 1970s. He was working locally among the Dalits in the Emaneswaram region, fighting against everyday discrimination and addressing civic issues. Distancing himself from electoral politics, he attempted to create solidarity among the Dalits and other minorities. In 1979, when 5 Dalits were murdered in Unjanai village, Sivaganga district following a clash over a temple festival where they demanded rights to carry mud horses and perform the ritual, the *Tamilaga Makkal Munnani* (the Tamil People's Front) to which Chandrabose was affiliated floated a forum called *Thazthapattor Urimai Sangam* (Forum for the Rights of Depressed Classes). Following this, Chandrabose became part of the *Sangam* but for unknown reasons the *Sangam* was dissolved in a few years. During the late 1980s, the Thevar Peravai started to be vigorously involved in cultural promotion. This included placing demands to honour Thevar heroes of the past by building statues and organising commemorations. An example of this was the erection of a memorial tomb for five Thevars who were shot down by police in the 1957 Mudukulathur riots. In a counter-symbolic response to this, in 1989, Chandrabose founded the Thiagi Immanuel Peravai (TIP) following his widespread campaign among Dalits in villages in and around Paramukudi. He claimed that

The founding of TIP is a politically significant event in the history of South Tamil Nadu's caste politics. TIP was a response to Thevar Peravai but it never

got its due in terms of attention to that of Thevar Peravai. TIP's aim was not only to assert Pallars alone but also Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars. Immanuel was strongly supported by Arunthathiyars. During Immanuel's time, an Arunthathiyar labourer from Tiruchi used to send portions of whatever little he earned as wages to the Depressed Classes League. When districts were named after leaders, TIP placed demands to name a district after Immanuel. In 1992, we organised our first state level conference and started observing Immanuel's anniversary as *Saathi Ozhippu Maaveerar Naal* (Caste Annihilation Hero's Day) and held rallies, which were led by Dalit Gnanasekaran of DLM. The 1995, conference of TIP was a huge one attended by 35,000 people and for the first time huge cloth painted banners of Ambedkar and Immanuel were placed around the venue. (Interview, Paramakudi, September 2014)

The turning point in the iconic construction of Immanuel, however, was the 1998 conference organised by Puthiya Tamilagam (PT) at Paramakudi. Its founding president, Krishnasamy was a medical practitioner who rose to fame following the widespread caste clashes that rocked the southern districts. At a time of heightened caste tension and competitive associationalism between the Dalits and Thevars in southern Tamil Nadu, PT's decision to organise a massive conference in Paramakudi caught the attention of both the media and the state. PT's state youth wing secretary, Baskar Maturam said,

Preparations for the conference included cleaning up the path to the memorial and the area surrounding the grave, which was left in a somewhat unattended way. The conference ended with a rally paying homage at Immanuel's grave, that was the first time thousands of people visited the memorial, prior to that only a few people close to 500 were attending. (Interview, Madurai, July 2015)



Figure 24: Badge used for PT's first state level conference held on Immanuel's death anniversary in 1998 at Paramakudi. Photo: S. Deivam ©

As Olesen (2015) noted (above), the role of agents is important in the construction of iconicity, and we have seen how the efforts of the TTS, TIP and PT and PMK changed what was just a graveyard into a memorial. This effort transformed the mundane Tamil Nadu Evangelical Lutheran Church (TELC) Christian graveyard at Paramakudi from being, in effect, simply a spot for family and community members to remember his sacrifice to a sanctified Revolutionary's graveyard. This transformation was further deepened when the TIP not only floated a movement in the name of the icon, but also helped to make his death anniversary day, *Saathi Ozhippu Maaveerar Naal* (Caste Annihilation Hero's Day), a much wider event. When in 1998, PT organised the state conference, this cemented matters. The grave became a monument to Dalit power and over the years the anniversary was termed a GP (to be discussed in the following chapter). The memorialising of the public resting place of one of Tamil Nadu's foremost anti-caste martyrs now constitutes a viewing platform from which anti-caste crusaders

and Dalit politicians oversee the continuation of anti-caste struggles. Part of this struggle is embodied in the largescale iconisation of Immanuel from the late 1990s. No longer just limited to the celebration of his grave, statues, murals, lithographs and posters of Immanuel proliferated. These symbolic resources and activities of collective memorialisation, like GPs and folk songs, took the icon to the masses.

The imprinting of Immanuel's image on both the political and visual landscape was a conscious effort to transfer and utilise his desirable qualities as the ideal masculine and rebellious man who fought for equal rights. Dalit men under the weight of the pressures of a casteist society looked to a man who had dealt with the same pressures and withstood the onslaught. Among the Pallar men, this consciousness created a solidarity that infused them with the energy to be fearless, oppose discrimination and demand respect. More than any other leader in Tamil Nadu of the past (apart from perhaps Ambedkar), Immanuel⁵⁴ expanded the conception of Dalit cultural identity by offering the Dalits an image of their fighting character. The wide visibility of the images of Immanuel spread this to a larger portion of the Dalit population. More than when he was alive, Immanuel as an icon has become a popular champion of the Dalit struggle for political freedom and liberation with the ability to influence people from a diverse range of backgrounds. In the early years described here, the emphasis was on reviving his memory and recounting his story. Over time, however, the icon has changed in multiple ways. Let us now examine the iconographic pattern and analyse its symbolic effect as a counter statement.

⁵⁴ Among the contemporary Dalit leaders, though Pallar leaders like John Pandian, Pasupathi Pandian (deceased) and Dr. Krishnasamy at different stages played a significant role in espousing the militancy of Dalit politics, it was Thirumavalavan who had a broader appeal, his infamous slogan *Adanga Maru Athu Meeru, Thimiri Ezhu Thiruppi Adi* (Refuse to Submit, Break the Shackles, Rise Up and Hit Back) and his rhetorical flourishes had a bigger impact in disturbing the conscience of dominant castes and he is easily the most influential Dalit leader in the state.

Iconographic Pattern: The Prominence of the Chair as a Metonym of Dalit Struggles

One of the most striking visual signifiers used in Immanuel iconography is a chair upon which Immanuel is often seated cross-legged. There are specific resonances in this context as we will see, but there is a wider pattern at play here too. The chair, according to Rybczynski (1986: 26), is used in complex ways to signify power relations through status, hierarchy, belonging, action and identity. The chair in his analytical framework is a locus of power and control, while at the same time reciprocally signifying subordination; the obligation to rise from a chair being a sign of subservience. The Chair carries significance not only as a material entity but also by its location, image, size, design and grandeur. It can be an important instrument for the signaling or refusing of power (Rybczynski, 1986: 26; Brummett, 2004: 104).

In the modern western political context, the Civil Rights Movement in the US is important for our understanding of the power of chair and being seated within the global social justice milieu. Martin Luther King Jr's famous 'I have a dream' speech refers to the chair in an inclusive sense, anticipating that 'one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood'.⁵⁵ The emphasis on the chair can be traced back to the 1960s. When there were largescale struggles against the denial of basic civil rights for African Americans, one of the most tangible modes of resistance to Jim Crow laws was to sit down at segregated lunch counters, restaurants, waiting rooms and so forth. To sit in a chair as a mark of protest and therefore suffer the taunts and outrage of segregationists was to assert a claim of being, belonging and status in defiance of laws that attempted to assign a second-class status to African Americans (Brummett, 2004: 112). The act of defiance often considered as a turning point in the history of the Civil Rights Movement involved such an assertion, when Rosa Parks refused to vacate her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery (Kennedy, 1989; Brummett, 2004).

⁵⁵ The full speech may be found here: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm> (Accessed 13/07/2017).

In India, individuals from learned judges to elected members of the local body have been victims of caste-based discrimination and were denied equal status. In this context, the chair or the act of seating or being seated is again seen as an act of defiance against the established social norms. Before we turn to Immanuel's act of defiance defined by the chair, let us have a glimpse of what it means for a Dalit to occupy a chair or be seated within the caste-based social order in contemporary India. In 2009, Harendra Kumar Manjhi, a Dalit man in his late 20s, was shot dead in Salempur village in Saran district, Bihar by a group of upper caste men for sitting on a chair to watch a music performance at a wedding, thus violating the social status code (Indian Express, 4 December 2009). In 2012, fifty-two-year-old K Perumal, despite being the panchayat president of Kadaneri village in Peraiyur taluk of Madurai did not enter the panchayat office because he was denied even the basic freedom to sit in the chair in his own office. Since he hails from the Dalit community, the dominant caste representatives would not allow him to sit (*Times of India*, 13 April 2012). Likewise, Shanmugasundaram, president of Puliur Natham panchayat in Dindigul district, was not allowed to occupy his seat in the panchayat office even once by the non-Dalit vice-president. (Evidence Report 2012, *Times of India*, 13 April 2012). One of the most brutal massacres of Dalits in Tamil Nadu happened in Melavalavu, Madurai District in 1997, when a Dalit man ran for the post of panchayat president and won. He and six other Dalit men were traveling in a bus when they were waylaid and beheaded, it was reported that the murderers shouted 'A Paraiyan may occupy the chair of the President of India, but how can we allow a Paraiyan to sit on the chair of a Panchayat President that we have sat on?' (Thirumavalavan, 2003: 26). Contests over seating, thus, continue to mark caste status and to occasion violence even today. It was just such an altercation that resulted in Immanuel's murder.

On 10 September 1957, as we have seen, Immanuel refused to stand up when Muthuramalinga Thevar entered the hall for the peace meeting. As everyone in the hall stood up as a mark of respect for Thevar, Immanuel firmly remained seated and, as the legend says, cross-legged. Angered, in large part, over this lack of respect, Thevar told

his followers that a lower caste member had insulted him. The following day Immanuel was murdered (*Dinamani*, 3 September, 1958). Part of the iconisation process around Immanuel has seen this exchange immortalised. This act of defiance features significantly in the visual cultural practices of the Pallars (Figure 24).



Figure 25. Flexboard banners on the Paramakudi Main Road.

In line with Rybczynski's (1986: 26) analysis, Immanuel's status and power is depicted by placing him in regal posture upon a large decorative chair or throne. In order to understand the drive that informed these political aesthetics, I spoke with men who are a part of this visual culture. Babu (27) of Pambuvizhunthan village in Ramanathapuram district along with his friends as part of his village committee had erected the flexbanner of Immanuel seated on a chair cross-legged, placing it on the Paramakudi Main Road. Though not associated with any political outfit, Babu was a sympathiser of Pasupathi Pandian, the fiery Pallar leader from Tuticorin. When asked about how they came up with this banner design and why they chose to refer him to as *Deiva Thirumaganar* (Divine Descendant – see Figure 25) a reference associated with Muthuramalinga Thevar, he said,

Thiagi (Martyr) Immanuel was a real brave heart, when there was so much fear among people to even stand in front of Muthuramalinga Thevar, he remained seated with crossed legs. In order to celebrate that bravery and sacrifice, we have put this image of Immanuel seated on a grandly decorated chair. We also made sure that the images of *Annal* Ambedkar and *Maaveeran* (Brave heart)

Pasupathi Pandian should be there. *Deiva Thirumaganar* is a common term and no one can monopolise it. If Thevar was divine for them, Immanuel is divine for us. (Interview, Paramakudi, September 2015)

The iconography on this banner includes some newer elements, which define the contestation between the Thevars and Pallars. The left hand topside corner has images of three male figures holding the flags bearing the fish, bow and arrow and tiger symbols, which represent the ancient Pandya, Chera and Chola kingdoms. These symbols are largely used by the Thevars (see Chapter 3) who started to appropriate them in the 1970s through the *Thevar Peravai* (Thevar Forum). This, along with the usage of the sobriquet *Deiva Thirumaganar* by the Pallars, demonstrates the symbolic contestations between these castes. The image also quotes an old Tamil literary reference that refers to the people engaged in agriculture as Mallars, a nomenclature that is gaining widespread acceptance⁵⁶ among the Pallars, with some groups laying sustained claim to being the Mallars of the ancient era. Amidst all this, the central feature of the banner is the chair and a seated Immanuel wearing a pure white shirt, *veshti* and green and red bordered *thundu* (shawl), which are the markers of a dominant caste and a dress code historically denied to Dalits. Placing these enhanced visual markers on the main road is not only an act of defiance, but encourages Dalits to replicate Immanuel's behavior. This same iconographic pattern dominated the visual landscape on the occasion of Immanuel's GP and almost seventy per cent of the images had Immanuel seated cross-legged on a highly decorated chair. Numerous folk songs also celebrate this event. Rajendran, a writer and ideologue who was with PT during its formative years, said,

Though Immanuel functioned as a local leader, his courage to stand-up against one of the most feared leaders of that time and his subsequent murder turned him into a big martyr and the remembrances in the form of such visual markers depicting the historical stand-off in a nuanced way are unavoidable and it will be a recurring theme for many years to come. (Interview, Coimbatore, June 2015)

His refusal to stand up stands out as a mark of 'self-respect' and the 'refusal to submit',

⁵⁶ During the time of my research I found out that most of the rural youth who are aware of such cultural and political developments happening within the community, nevertheless they were more or less identifying themselves with categories like SC, SC PL(Scheduled Caste Pallar). But among the urban youth and especially the upwardly mobile Pallars who have adequate access to social media etc are using the terms Mallar and Devendra Kula Vellalar in their posters and visual media.

both critical concepts in the understanding of Dalit struggles for equality and social justice. Immanuel used the act of sitting as a form of empowerment and a constructive confrontation with the past. In comparison, the elderly among the Dalits, including leaders like Perumal Peter, were found standing when Muthuramalinga Thevar entered the hall. This is taken to indicate that they remain disempowered and subordinate. It is no wonder, in this light, that it is Immanuel who has become the icon of Dalit assertion today.

Competing Masculinities

Another significant aspect of the iconographic pattern is the attempt to present a more masculinised image of Immanuel. Two examples are pertinent here. The first concerns a statue of Immanuel alongside one of Ambedkar, decorating the main entrance to Madurai's Chinna Udaippu village on the Madurai to Aruppukkottai Highway. The Immanuel iconography here was consciously created under the gaze of TTS. Immanuel is in his military garb holding a rifle, denoting both his time in the Indian Army and symbolising Pallar militancy in response to the 'naturalised' martiality associated with the Thevars in Tamil discourse. Ambedkar, in comparison holds the Constitution. The positioning of Immanuel and Ambedkar can be seen as combining masculine power and educationalist progress. One of the main organisers of the statue committee, K. Thanjaraj said that it was a collective decision made by the villagers to install the statues of Ambedkar and Immanuel at the entrance of the village. The village consists of only Pallars and has a population of close to one thousand members most of who are involved in jasmine cultivation, paddy, plantain and coconut farming and with a few government employees who were associated with the radical politics of the late A. Malaichamy Tamil Nadu's DPI convenor. Thangaraj continued,

Though we had planned to install a statue in the village during Annan Malaichamy's time we were not able to do that but were able to install Dr.Ambedkar's statue at the Airport entrance, so in the 1990s we thought of having the statues of both Dr. Ambedkar and Martyr Immanuel to inculcate their qualities among the next generation and with the help of TTS we were able to make it a reality... (Interview, Madurai, May 2015)

The second instance appeared in the magazine, *Pattali Muzhakkam* (Toiler's Clarion – now defunct). The magazine appointed an artist, C. Pichaimani, who re-drew the image of Immanuel who is normally portrayed with a toothbrush moustache. This new image (see Figure 26), published in the January-February 1997 edition of the magazine, has Immanuel with a twirled and fully-grown moustache. The artist was introduced as a member of the DKV community, hailing from Maaranadu village in Manamadurai Circle, Pasumpon District (now Ramanathapuram district). This was not the only attempt to adjust the moustache; there were several other attempts by different interest groups within the community to portray Immanuel's moustache differently although the toothbrush version that most closely resembles surviving photos remains most common. This indicates the vulnerability of icons as they stand to be used for different purposes by different set of actors in social and political settings. Immanuel's image, like Thevar's (see Chapter 4), has been modified for socio-political reasons and to connote particular messages.



Figure 26. The Magazine *Pattali Muzhakkam* talks about the appointment of an artist for the magazine and features his new image of Immanuel with a twirled up moustache.

An up-turned moustache in the Tamil popular context is a construct associated with the southern districts and the Thevar caste, made popular by visual representation mostly in

films. Nakassis (2016: 3) observes that a curling moustache is typically associated with the Madurai region and is seen as a sign of traditional, rugged, adult masculinity, iconic of power, aggression, and dominance and representative of certain dominant martial castes. The magazine's attempt to re-portray Immanuel clearly indicates that there is an element of discomfort associated with the lack of abundant facial hair in the existing iconography. Facial hair being an idiom of masculine aggression in the cultural context, they perceive a lack of masculinity in the already circulated images and this attempt to redraw is a potentially re-masculinising effort to instill power and aggression to the icon. I would like to recall Taussig's argument that 'the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power' (Taussig, 1993: xiii). We have already seen a similar attempt in the case of Muthuramalinga Thevar, when the Thevar Peravai showcased a more masculinised Thevar, and here the emerging middle classes among the Pallars also proved to be worried about the texture of symbols as they aimed to construct a competing representation of Immanuel that was more in keeping with the narrative surrounding their icon.

The image of Immanuel as a fearless, articulate, uncompromising, traditional modern man, as constructed by SCALM, TIP, and PT over a period of time in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s has been popularised during the current period of heightened tension between the Thevars and Dalits. During the mid 1980s and 1990s there was a conscious reworking of the norms of masculinity. Exemplified by the provocative slogan *Maravanai Vettu Maratthiyai Kattu* (Sickle cut the Maravan and Marry the Marava Women) attributed to the fierce Pallar leader John Pandian, Dalit masculinity revolved around the concept of counter-violence and symbolic structures are an extension of that. (See Anandhi et al, 2002; Lakshmanan, 2004).

The anxiety to present highly masculinised martial symbols is not confined to Immanuel alone. The latest developments in the iconographic pattern followed by the Pallars are also centered on martiality. During the late 1990s, following the discovery of the colonial era hero, Veeran Sundaralingam, who served as a lieutenant in Poligar Pulithevan's army, he was added to the existing iconography. The Pallars, in the mode

of the Thevars, have also started taking symbols and motifs from the ancient Tamil society and merging them with modern imagery in a counter-symbolic effort. The symbolic investment here is martial in nature, much like the Thevar version. As we saw in Figure 25 (above), a section of the Pallars have started to use the Moovendhar (Three Kings) insignia, representing the Cheras, Cholas and Pandiyas, and laid claim to a kingly past. This brings them into a direct symbolic contest with the Thevars, who through various idioms have been claiming that they are the direct descendants of these kingdoms. What, though, is the impact of such symbolism? We turn now to the importance of statues and the idea of counterspatial symbolism.

Immanuel Sekaran Statues and Counterspatial Symbolism

The first known statue of Immanuel was erected in 1985, not in his hometown or his district but in Tirunelveli district in a village called Senthattiyapuram by the villagers. It was part of an attempt to have their own icon like members of other castes in nearby villages. In the same district, in 1987 saw the construction of statues of Immanuel and Ambedkar in Vadanathampatti village square. The Vadanathampatti Students Welfare Association installed them. Balaji, a youth wing secretary of Puthiya Tamilagam who hails from the district, said that the government employees from the village, mostly teachers, had evinced a lot of interest, not only offering support but also donating money for the venture. The mid to late 1980s witnessed a resurgence of Dalit mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, partly in response to aggressive assertions of caste pride by intermediate castes like the Thevars and Vanniars (cf. Wyatt 2009). Initially, statues of Immanuel were installed alongside those of Ambedkar in village squares or entrances, and I paid particular attention to such statues during my fieldwork. Here, I will be focusing on the statues in Keezhakanniseri and Sellaiyipuram, as they are found in spatially significant locations, surrounded by Thevar villages in communally sensitive zones.

Keezhakanniseri village has 250 families belonging to the Pallar caste and most of them are engaged in agriculture, with a handful of them getting into government jobs. For almost 30 years there exists an agreement between the Pallars of Keezhakanniseri and Thevars of Keezhathooval, which originally came into existence following the

‘Ramanathapuram riots’ in 1982. According to the agreement directed by the government, the people of these two villages should not use each other’s road during commemorative events. Keezhakanniseri Pallars hate the Keezhathooval Thevars because it was their men who were involved in the murder of Immanuel and there has been a legacy of tension and violence between the communities since then. Velmurugan (32) of the village said,

After floating the *Dr. Ambedkar Panpattu Maiyyam* (Dr. Ambedkar Cultural Centre), we decided to install statues of Immanuel and Ambedkar. ‘It was a collective effort, every member of the community in the village contributed towards the construction of the statue...’(Field Notes, Keezhakanniseri, September 2014)

The collective investment helps to create a sense of pride, belonging and identity, and the link to political assertion was seen in the opening ceremony. John Pandian, the militant Dalit leader who was then heading the *Agila India Devendra Kula Vellalar Samooga Munnetra Sangam* in the presence of P. Chandrabose, founder of TIP, unveiled the Keezhakanniseri Ambedkar and Immanuel statues on 13th September 1992. The latter unfurled the red and green community flag. The statues were out in the open on a pedestal. However, following the widespread desecration of statues of Dalit leaders and Muthuramalinga Thevar in southern districts, resulting in further violence, the government ordered that they be placed in cages in early 2000 and be subject to special security arrangements:

Ambedkar ... is wearing a dark blue coat matched with white trousers and carries the Indian Constitution, Immanuel standing next to him is in a yellow shirt and a white veshti and is also carrying a book but has no sandals on him. Since it was September the district administration had placed a constable to guard the statue from any miscreants vandalising it. When I went to take a photo, he duly inquired about my purpose. (Field Notes, Keezhakanniseri, September 2014)

The use of cages and presence of police guards speaks to the sensitivity of such images. Indeed, in recalling the unveiling of the statue, Chandrabose said that it was a deliberate, counter symbolic act by the Pallars:

The Keezhathooval Thevars came up with a memorial pillar depicting the ‘martyrdom’ of five Thevars who were shot dead in a police encounter during

the Mudukulathur riots in 1957. The pillar was erected by Thevar Peravai's A.C. Seenisamy Thevar on 26 January 1990. It stands on the left side of the main road leading to Paramakudi. Following this effort, the Keezhakanniseri Pallars, who are quite aggressive in the region, decided to install the statues of Dr. Ambedkar and Immanuel as a response.

K: How do you view this act of Pallars installing statues of Ambedkar and Immanuel in a highly sensitive zone?

P.C: I refer to this as an act of construction of *Ethir Kuriyeedu* (a counter symbol).

K: Was this a significant feature of caste relations at that point of time?

P.C: Yes that era, the late 1980s and early 1990s, was marked by such acts of both symbolic and caste based assertion. We, as a counter measure, rallied in the name of annihilation of caste putting in front Ambedkar and Immanuel. It was Thevar Peravai for them and we countered it with Thiagi Immanuel Peravai.

He continued to narrate how the district administration sought to thwart their efforts by not allowing the Pallars in the village to build a statue on government land. The villagers then responded that they would install the statue on their own *patta* (legal title conforming ownership of land) land and started construction. The revenue authorities opposed it, arguing that it was government land. After talks, a land survey was done and it was found out that it was built on *patta* land. This willingness to cede scarce landholdings for the erection of symbols of defiance speaks to the strength of feeling in the village.

The unveiling was planned for 11 September 1992, which was the death anniversary of Immanuel. The plan was to come to Keezhakanniseri in a procession right from Paramakudi, after paying homage at Immanuel's memorial. However, police denied permission, anticipating trouble as the procession has to pass through Thevar dominated villages. Chandrabose said, 'police rejected the idea of using those routes to come to Keezhakanniseri outright and instead gave a gap of one day and asked us to have the unveiling event on September 13. Police expected that by doing so it would become a simple ceremony, but we were able to gather quite a lot of people. There were incidences of violence at a few places but somehow we managed to unveil the statue'. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2014)



Figure 27. Statues of Ambedkar and Immanuel on the corner of the main road at Keezhakanniseri village in Ramanathapuram district.

The above-discussed example of counter-symbolism from Keezhakanniseri through the icons of Immanuel and Ambedkar shows that social movements can represent and use certain symbolic codes belonging to the established powers to contest hegemony. They thereby create a counter discourse, questioning the very dominance and authority that tries to marginalise them. Though the villagers initially took the efforts, it has to be noted that TIP had a key role in organising and overseeing this process of counter-symbolism. Here, the symbolic statues become markers of dissent and resistance but also act as a rallying or dispersion point. Ambedkar statues across India, for example, are often the congregating spot for Dalits to stage demonstrations and protests, or to celebrate their struggles. This relationship with spatial forms of symbolism helps in challenging dominance, both in the social and political spheres.

The Immanuel statue installed in Madurai District raises similar points (see Figure 27). Sellaiyipuram is a village located in the highly sensitive Elumalai region near Usilampatti. Elumalai witnessed a series of clashes during the late 1980s and mid 1990s between Pallars and members of various other intermediate castes led mainly by Thevars. One of my interlocutors during my ethnography, Karnan (32) of PT's youth wing, belongs to the village:

Sellayipuram is a Pallar village with 450 households; most of them are doing agricultural work with fifteen members in Indian Army and ten members working as schoolteachers. The Immanuel statue was installed in the year 2006, it's an individual one where Immanuel is wearing half sleeve pure white shirt and a *veshti* with a red and green border, indicating the caste colours. What was strikingly different from every other Immanuel statue I saw here was that Immanuel is holding a paper in his hand, which Karnan referred to as a petition demanding an end to practices of untouchability. This image strikingly resembles that of the Muthuramalinga Thevar statue at Goripalayam Madurai, where Thevar can be seen holding a sheet of folded paper indicating his struggles against the CTA.

While we were discussing, a group of elders came nearby and got involved in the conversation. Karnan explained that the statue was originally installed near the main road and on hearing this, with a strong posse of police force the revenue officials removed the statue citing no prior permission was obtained, amid largescale protests by the villagers. 'The statue was then housed here in this place, which is our own *patta* land. The idea to install Immanuel's statue was driven by the fact that when other communities can have statues of their leaders, why can't we have them.' Immediately one of the elders intervenes and says, 'particularly the Thevars can have Muthuramalinga Thevar statue at every other corner where they live why can't we have our leader's statue. Since it is a highly sensitive zone, it remains a great challenge for the Pallars in the region to install a statue of Immanuel. However, they have installed it now and every year they celebrate Immanuel's anniversary as an important festival. (Field Notes, Madurai May, 2015)



Figure 28. An Immanuel Sekaran statue placed in a private hall near the main road at Sellayipuram village near Madurai.

This effort by the Sellaiyipuram villagers was driven by the desire to install Immanuel as a counter-symbol in a given spatial location where symbolism is already in existence. However the state, as the legitimate authority, which appropriates the right to speak (Das, 2004), has made the Dalit icon invisible. The contrast with the competitive celebration of Thevar seen in the last chapter is stark here. Where successive Tamil Governments led the way in celebrating Thevar, the iconisation of Immanuel has been more of a bottom-up process. We have seen how the people never give up; they organise events around the statue on the occasion of Immanuel's death anniversary on 11th September and all the rituals, like milk pots, breaking coconuts and sprouts and pongal distribution are performed. This act of counter-symbolism stands testimony to Karanth's (2004) contention that replicatory practices need not imply consensus with the system, but may be a form of dissent.

In a highly hierarchical social structure, where notions of inequality form the basic norms of everyday social and political life, it could be argued that such counterspatial symbolic efforts can provide representation for subalterns against exclusion and marginalisation. It is not surprising then that such claims over public space provoke conflict with caste Hindus who see this as a challenge to their hegemony. Their reactions normally include the desecration of statues, triggering unrest. Through the two examples used above, where I compare rival Dalit and Thevar iconographic projects, I do not intend to suggest that equivalence exists between them. On the contrary, the celebrations of Immanuel show that Dalits can replicate such processes as a form of dissent as they struggle against their continued exclusion from public space and full political recognition.

Conclusion

Counterspatial symbolic efforts tell us that the discourse of rights and the demands for a variety of entitlements is expanding and transforming the meaning of citizenship. These acts put pressure on the state to confer fully-fledged rights and to confer recognition and visibility of these institutions, movements, or organisations (Blom Hansen and Finn,

2001). Mitchell (2014: 521) talks about the distinctions in terms of recognition and visibility of different groups through what she calls as ‘political arrival’ which is about the visibility or ability to be seen. As argued by Ramasamy (2011), mimetic activities on the margins enable the oppressed to signal their desire for a new kind of politics. The turbulent caste-cauldron during the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the resurrection of Immanuel as a popular counter figure of Dalit resistance. Providing an attractive masculinity, Immanuel’s image as a signifier of Dalit resistance found its way into the visual rhetoric. References to his martyrdom through both aural and visual representations were used to corroborate the interpretation of Dalit groups. His recognition and celebration as an independent and assertive Dalit hero did not happen on its own. As we have seen here, he was relatively unknown for close to three decades before different political entrepreneurs rediscovered him.

Immanuel has become one of the most publicly visible icons of recent times in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in the state. To provide an example, the recent blockbuster movie of Tamil superstar Rajnikanth, *Kabali* (2016, Dir: Ranjith) saw a series of intense debates in the popular media because its protagonist - a low-caste Tamil labourer - rises to become a don in Malaysia. The film was directed by Ranjith, who hails from the Dalit community, and his previous films with their strong positive representation of Dalit life-worlds already guaranteed great hype. Rajnikanth playing the lead role as a Dalit contributed to this, given his superstardom. The film was the first to highlight Ambedkar’s iconography in the Tamil context, with reference to his sartorial aesthetics as a form of dissent and resistance. However, the highlight of the film in the Dalit context, was a sequence where Rajnikanth in the climax addresses the villain while seated cross-legged on a chair. He challenges him: ‘If you have a problem seeing me, a labourer, overcome all the obstacles and come up in life, wear suits or sit cross-legged in front of you, I will do that much to your chagrin.’ This scene and the dialogue was taken up by Dalit activists and supporters and was imagined beyond the reel in real life, as a replication of the contestation that happened between Immanuel and Muthuramalinga Thevar in 1957. Memes and animated images of Immanuel seated on a chair delivering the *Kabali* dialogue hit social media and rumours grew that the next movie of

Rajnikanth could be a biography of Immanuel (see figure 29) Whilst full political recognition remains elusive, in *Kabali* we see how pervasive and widely recognized the counter-symbolism of Pallar assertion has become.



Figure 29. A flexboard banner carrying images of Tamil actor Rajnikanth (as Immanuel), film director Pa. Ranjith and Immanuel himself, kept at Paramakudi during Immanuel GP in 2016 in anticipation of their next film project to be about Immanuel. Photo: Ilaiyaraja ©

Death enabled the image of Immanuel to reach distances that the man himself would have never foreseen. The circumstances surrounding his death are partially responsible to the characterisation of him as a martyr. That he was murdered for his assertion and mobilisation is crucial. Additionally, Immanuel's forays into Ambedkarite politics, rights based movements, radical groups and social reform associations positioned him in one of the most progressive, and all encompassing, caste struggles that marked that era. By the time of his death, Immanuel was already a hero for his unwavering commitment to Dalit equality. Death transformed the image of Immanuel as a Dalit hero into that of a martyr who was the forbearer of the Dalit struggle for equality and social

justice and its related cultural movements. However, it was a calculated push endorsed by political entrepreneurs that brought him back to public memory. Whilst the recovery and dissemination of his image and the construction of statues brought him into public gaze, it was arguably the annual GP event that marks his death anniversary that fully iconised Immanuel. In the next chapter, we will examine Immanuel's GP to get a deeper understanding of replication, dissent and counter-hegemonic discourse.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Immanuel Sekaran Guru Puja as a Dalit Counter Public

Introduction

No annual event in contemporary Tamil Nadu causes as much anxiety for governmental authorities, due to its potential for violence, than the death anniversary observations of Dalit leader Immanuel. The only possible exception is Thevar GP. This chapter offers a detailed ethnographic account of Immanuel Sekaran GP and, through a discussion of its associated performances, illustrates the production and politicisation of a collective social identity. Caste status and power is played out in multiple ways, creating boundaries and reinforcing group identities. This has been seen in the case of Thevar GP, which provides opportunities for the public enactment of the locally dominant Thevar community's strength and power (traditional authority), including through the appropriation of public space. Immanuel GP, by contrast, allows for the occupation of public space by members of a marginalised community.

In demonstrating how a marginalised community uses public performances to assert new identities it is crucial to look at the fine distinctions within such performances. It is also important to recognise the duality of performance in terms of structures of power. As Taylor (2014: 338) says, 'Performance is a two-edged sword, as powerful in contesting power as in maintaining it. Power, we might argue, lies in the ways claims are enacted and made visible. Who controls the resonant symbols, gestures, colours, language and what are these made to transmit?' For the socially marginalised groups who have been historically denied access to public discourse and social power, performances have become an effective and innovative way of amplifying and eliciting responses to social demands. They 'embody social testimonials that speak for the experiences of many other people, who share cultural, social, economic and political

marginality’ and reframe ‘invisibility and visibility by articulating social positions’ (Guevara, 2014: 389-390).

GPs are characterised by the intensity of mobilisation and the use of visual signifiers in public spaces. This relates to the literature on space, in particular Lefebvre and Mitchell’s theoretical analyses. For Lefebvre (1991), representational spaces are an oppositional category to dominant modes of producing spaces. In terms of spatial meanings for him, quotidian forms of life and their manifestations form part of the critique of space and its modes of representation. Mitchell (1995) notes the importance of creating public spaces for the subaltern classes; in our study, the visibility of Dalits through Immanuel GP at least momentarily shifts the established hegemony. The crowds of ‘untouchable’ bodies, which can be seen as a low-caste invasion and reclamation of the street, raise questions of participation and access: who is allowed to perform on the street and who is placed in the role of audience? Does this appropriation of public space provide an insight into how established codes of dominance are being challenged? Does the event give Dalits the space to represent their needs and desires to the state? Can this occupation be seen as representational?

Chapter Outline

This chapter aims to unpack the spatial meanings of Immanuel GP. The event, which was initially celebrated in a simple manner in the late-1980s, gained significance in the mid-2000s owing to contentious politics. GP related public performances intensified contestations between the Pallars and Thevars. Different Dalit political outfits, organisations and Pallar caste associations participate in the event and it has become a counter-narrative for the Dalits, allowing them to display their strength and defiance in public. It also functions as a symbolic challenge to the superiority of the dominant castes and the state. The event is built around the emergence of Immanuel as a counter-symbolic figure. As part of the process of his iconisation, the event engages in the creation of a socio-political identity, and this provides an entry point to study the ritual construction of political power through public ceremony. Following Fraser (1990), I

refer to this as a subaltern counterpublic; it provides the space for groups to consistently challenge dominant practices.

This chapter begins with a genealogical account of the GP by drawing upon personal interviews. I then analyse the event as a discursive field through the opinions of the participants and their affiliations. Participant observation is at the core of my approach, but primary and secondary sources including pamphlets, invitations, handbills and other visual materials inform my interpretation. I conclude with a discussion of the performative politics and spatial meanings of Immanuel GP. To substantiate my argument for the GP as a counterpublic, I draw upon Kaviraj's 'spectacles of inversion' concept. First, though, we must place the event in context.

Context

In chapter 5, we saw how social power was (re)produced through the GP in the case of the Thevars. With regard to the Pallars the event allows for the *countering* of dominance through the same language. Thevar GP, which was made a government sponsored and recognised event, has become a legitimate space for the Thevars to display their dominance in public. Immanuel's GP (yet to be recognised by the state) offers a counter-cultural performance. Dalits make use of public areas as 'representational' spaces to defy norms, taking over the roads and public thoroughfares with their temporary, huge flex-banners and diverse imagery depicting their caste struggles and leaders. The logic of representation in Immanuel GP is critical here, both in terms of the collective as a caste group and as individuals claiming rights and wanting to make their needs heard by the state and competitive groups. This aspect of the historical struggle to claim equal rights is key to our understanding of public space in terms of caste contestations.

The forms of Dalit self-expression found publically can be seen as embodying a combination of defiance and complicity. It is debatable whether Immanuel's GP in this context can be seen as a 'political' effort towards the re-ascription of *Dalit* identity in

positive cultural terms. Certainly the performance of this identity in a public setting such as the street is in itself a politically assertive act (Keith, 1996). The participants, however, are able to contribute to the performance of the festival through their *caste* identities and cultural markers, and GPs often operate on an exclusionary basis where the participation of certain castes is physically restricted. In Immanuel GP, those categorically defined as ‘untouchable’ are present and performing during the whole event, pointing towards the shift from the upper-caste hegemony over public streets. Their bodies in motion, often marching, ‘perform the streets’, and dramatise all manner of group concerns and issues related to religious and political convictions. As Burke (1997: 101) observes, ‘rituals function as re-enactments of the past and acts of memory, but they are also attempts to refashion interpretations of the past, to shape memory and thus to construct social identity. They are in every sense collective representations.’ They, therefore, offer insights into the nature of the social system or cultural edifices and enhance our understanding of the meanings of political behaviour. The street is where the political categories of liberal democracy manifest themselves. One should not forget that historically any effort to politically assert and represent themselves in public space has been a struggle for Dalits, for example Ambedkar’s Mahad Struggle to Draw Water from a Public Tank.⁵⁷

In terms of understanding the occupation of public space, both physically and visually, Rancière (2004:12) argues that the ‘aesthetic is, in some sense, always political.’ He focuses on the fine arts rather than the arts of political mobilisation, but his ‘distribution of the sensible’ illuminates the complex relationships between politics and aesthetics. This phrase refers to ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’ (2004: 12). Given the historical context, and the social position of Dalits, I suggest that in Dalit movements in particular the political itself becomes primarily aesthetic. As Jain (2014: 150) clarifies, ‘[t]he

⁵⁷ The Mahad struggle was a watershed moment in the Dalit struggle for equality. Mahad is a town in Maharashtra where Dalits were denied access to water from the Chowdar tank meant for public use. Despite threats, Dr. Ambedkar led a campaign and succeeded in drawing water from the tank in 1927, following which it was thrown open for use by Dalits.

distribution of sensible is intimately tied to the political, through the institution within specific structures of power of divisions between sayable and the unsayable, the visible and the invisible, the audible and inaudible.’ The ‘distribution of the sensible’, according to Jain, is ‘all about the right to a share in what is common to the community, based on what they do and where and when they do it’. In Rancière’s observation, it is all about class, which defines this temporally and spatially delimited action. In the Tamil context it is primarily caste that influences sense perception. The distribution of who feels what in terms of a range of experiences – including consumption patterns of clothing and food, the occupation of particular spaces, the sight, smell and sound of deities and modes of worship – is often determined by caste. As a foil to frequent deprivation along these lines, Dalit mobilisation is characterised by sensory intensity and even extravagance.

Tracing the Commemoration of Immanuel Sekaran

Immanuel GP, which is held every year on September 11, at Paramakudi, is a recently developed event. Though a small function was held the year after his murder in 1958, it was discontinued due to pressure from the Thevars. Information obtained from discussions with leaders and elders from the community indicates that there were initially no organised events to observe and commemorate Immanuel’s death anniversary. It was only after almost thirty years, as discussed earlier, that the Dalit movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s rediscovered Immanuel, thanks to the intervention of a theological patron. Elsewhere, Mosse (2012: 268-269) discusses the ‘incubation of Dalit politics within a theological enterprise’, explaining how the Catholic Church in Ramnad used its ‘political-economic investment’ to bring about a social change especially among the lower castes. Mosse asserts that it was Christianity, which made the Catholic Pallars political subjects (2012: 274). A similar form of enterprise was active in this case. The efforts of the Anglican, Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS) were significant in putting Immanuel at the centre of Dalit politics in southern districts. Immanuel and Ambedkar became symbols of defiance and assertion in the competitive associationalism between Pallars and Thevars. Mosse discusses how

the Christian Pallars in the Ramnad region contested Thevar networks of power inherited from the royal-feudal arrangements. TTS, here acted as a catalyst for the Dalit emancipation process, and Immanuel became a key figure in this countercultural space (Ravanan, 2008).

Following the efforts of TTS and SCALM (Scheduled Castes Liberation Movement) in bringing Immanuel into the limelight, community activists worked to carve out a political space. This was a time when Thevar-Pallar relations were at a low and marked by violent incidents across southern Tamil Nadu. There was an upsurge among the Pallars, reflected in their determination to 'hit back' during the 1989 Thevaram and Bodi riots (Shanmughabharati, 1993, Pandian, 2000). The clashes epitomised the contestation between the two castes marked by symbolism. As a critical feature of the Pallar upsurge, the *Thiagi Immanuel Peravai* (Martyr Immanuel Forum) in Paramakudi started celebrating Immanuel's death anniversary. It was a small event at first, attracting crowds within Ramnad and the neighbouring Virudhunagar district. However, during the late 1990s when the popular Dalit political party Puthiya Tamilagam (PT) started observing the anniversary, it attracted a crowd of twenty-five thousand people. Finally, in the mid-2000s, the event saw a manifold increase in the number of Dalits attending from across the state (more particularly the south and central districts). During this time the event was organised by the State and Central Government SC/ST Employees Union and had a strong associationalist aspect in terms of a larger Scheduled Caste or Dalit identity. P. Chandrabose highlights the competitive dynamic between castes:

The Immanuel anniversary was going on smoothly until in 2007, when the Thevar GP centenary was held and on the same year it was Immanuel's fiftieth death anniversary, so what was originally observed as *Saathi Ozhippu Maaveerar Naal* (Caste Annihilation Martyr's Day) or *Sama Urimai Porali Naal* (Equal Rights Revolutionary's Day) came to be observed as Immanuel GP. (Interview, Paramakudi, September 2014)

This change happened mainly due to the transfer of power in the organising committee from the SC/ST Government Employees Association to *Devendrar Panpattu Kazhagam* (Cultural Federation of Devendrars). I will discuss the implications of such changes at the end of this chapter. Now, let us turn to the event itself. The following sections

describe and analyse the events from the days preceding his anniversary until its end on the night of September 11.

On the Eve of Immanuel GP at Sellur

Along with Bakkiyaraj, a member of TIP, I rode out to Sellur (Immanuel's native village) on the eve of the GP and observed preparations along the way.

Paramakudi town was bustling with activity on the eve of Immanuel's GP. It was a mix of scenes: men from the Pallar community could be seen erecting flexboards on the main road and at other vantage points. On the other hand, it looked like a landscape under surveillance, with Khaki-clad policemen occupying every major corner of the town. On the way to Sellur we crossed two neighbourhoods that are Thevar dominant. The signboard of *Veera Marudhu Paasarai* (Brave Marudhu's Camp) on the eastern side of Krishna Theatre (landmark that marks Thevar neighbourhood) and a strong posse of policemen at the newly created police outpost indicated that it is a sensitive area and Bakkiyaraj confirmed it. ... The policemen were busy listening to their higher officials who were giving instructions on maintenance of law and order during the next day's event. Thevar Nagar and Thiruvalluvar Nagar near Krishna Theatre were made inaccessible for outsiders, with barricades erected to prevent any violation. The next village to cross was Venthoni, which is located just outside Paramakudi town. It is also a Thevar village and has a small statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar and a highly visible *Thevar Ilaiginar Peravai* (Thevar Youth Forum) board bearing images of Thevar, Subash Bose, Pulithevan and Lord Muruga with a roaring lion in the background. On top of the board was written *Anjuvadhun Adanguvadhun Thevar Oruvarukke* (We fear and submit only to Thevar). A few policemen were guarding the village to ensure a trouble-free event. All the way until we reached Sellur I was throwing a lot of questions to Bakkiyaraj, asking him about the sensitive nature of Paramakudi as a town due to caste violence. He explained to me how things have changed there since the 2011 police firing and 2012 violence. (Fieldnotes, Paramakudi, September 2015)

In earlier chapters we saw how Ramanathapuram district saw major violence in the 1930s, 1950s, 1980s and 1990s. Since the 1990s the nature of violence has changed, becoming marked by Dalit retaliation. The GP contestations intensified in the late 2000s and, following the police firing⁵⁸ in Paramakudi during Immanuel GP in 2011 and the subsequent violence in 2012 during Thevar GP, the district has become hypersensitive.

⁵⁸ During the 2011 Immanuel GP, following rumours that John Pandian was arrested, the TMMK cadres resorted to road roko following which the police indiscriminately fired and shot dead 6 Dalits. (Jaishankar and Karthikeyan, 2011).

All the police protection and surveillance seen now reflects those violent incidents. The geographical location, with a scattered population of both Pallars and Thevars makes it more sensitive; certain Taluks, in both popular imagination and governmental mechanisms, are seen as ‘Thevar dominated’ (i.e. Mudukulathur and Kamudhi) and ‘Pallar dominated’ (Paramakudi). There are also neighbourhoods that have an equal number of both castes. In these cases, castes seek to spatially mark their respective zones through signboards and flagpoles on the entrance of villages and neighbourhoods. The GP, of course, is the culmination of these struggles over visibility, which became clear when we reached Sellur.



Figure 30. An unfinished memorial of Immanuel in Sellur.

As we reached Sellur we could hear the famous song *Poaradada Vaazhendhada Vengaigalum Thoongadadha*⁵⁹ (Herald a sword and fight, the Tigers never rest) blaring from the speakers attached to the two corners of a small outdoor structure (see figure 30), which was built for Immanuel’s statue. This song from the Vijayakanth starring *Alai Osai* (Sound of Waves) has become an anthem of the Pallars and can be heard at almost all events across South Tamil Nadu during their festivals and events. A memorial like a small *mandapam* (Pillared structure open on all sides) was actually built for the installation of Immanuel’s statue, it was inaugurated by Krishnasamy during PT’s first state conference, which was held in Ramanathapuram in 1998. However it remains empty due to administrative hassles. As we were trying to sense what was happening, a

⁵⁹ This song, composed by Ilaiyaraja, inverts common portrayals of Dalits as victims or submissive adherents of caste hierarchy, and shows them opposing caste discrimination. The lyrics hail them as a ‘caste of Lions’.

couple of villagers instructed us to walk towards the main village for the Puja and related rituals. As we both walked towards the main village we could hear *kummi paatu* (narrative ballad) hailing Immanuel. Women and children were dancing in a circular motion, clapping their hands to each step forward and then tilting towards their left and back. It was almost ten at night but the whole village was awake and had gathered at the spot. While women were dancing outside, we went inside a room in a house where they had kept the *mulaippari* (sprouts consisting of nine grains) pots. A coloured paper origami model attached to a small stick was placed in-between the fully-grown sprouts, which were almost yellowish in colour. Betel leaves attached to a yellow thread with a piece of turmeric on the front were tied around the sprouts and a lime was placed on the top of the stick.



Figure 31. The villagers in Sellur offered *Padaiyal* (ancestral offerings) during the ritual performances on the eve of his GP.

Two banana leaves were placed in front of the sprout pots and a *Padaiyal* (Ancestral Offerings) (see figure 31) was offered to the memory of the deceased. It included three small heaps of cooked rice covered with *Naatukozhi kulambu* (Country Chicken Gravy), boiled eggs and *kozhukattai* (sweet dumplings made of rice flour with fillings of grated coconut and jaggery) and some fried fish, which were kept separately on a piece of paper. Two tender coconuts were placed next to the *Padaiyal*. The common items used to worship or perform Pujas, like coconut, incense sticks and banana, were also kept. After breaking the coconut as part of the *Padaiyal*, the first pot of sprouts was taken out and was loaded on Lakshmi's head and was ready to be carried on a procession to the outdoor hall at the entrance of the village.

The first pot that was carried to the hall was a brass one (other pots were made of clay) and had a big red and green chest badge with Immanuel's photo (See figure 32), stating that September 11 is Martyr's Day. In a small procession, all the women carried the *Mulaippari* from the middle of the village

to the *mandapam* at the entrance with music and fanfare (Field Notes, Sellur, September 2015)

An ethnographic documentation of the rituals involved indicates how Immanuel is accorded veneration much like village deities. Immanuel himself was formally a Christian and was cremated at the TELC graveyard, but these rituals and festivals point in part to the importation of Hindu religious practices. However, they are part of a two-pronged process; the offerings of non-vegetarian items to the deceased and the absence of standardised and textually derived ritual procedures also point to the folklorist, lower-caste/non-Brahmin tradition. For instance, the veneration of *kaaval deivam* (a guardian deity) who protects the villages requires the offering of meat, fish, blood and sometimes even alcohol and cheroot. Likewise, the practice of deifying people who die young trying to protect their kin and kith is also prevalent and most of those deified require blood sacrifices to pacify them. Immanuel here fits into the category of a 'local' hero as conceptualised by Stuart Blackburn (1985). He defied the established model of the hero mythicised in the traditional historical context who hailed from the privileged classes. Like the local heroes mentioned in Blackburn's analysis, Immanuel is revered for protecting the interests of the lower class people. In doing so he transgressed the established caste norms, was killed and earned the sobriquet *Thiagi* (Martyr). According to Mines (2005), fierce gods are created in the village itself, born from men or women who have met violent deaths. All over Tamil Nadu, they are created in violence and injustice (also see Reynolds, 1980; Blackburn, 1988; Hildebeitel, 1989; Trawick, 1991). Therefore, the rituals accorded to Immanuel here fit within the folklorist tradition. They are an extension of hero-worship, which has long been prevalent in Tamil tradition.

Anti-caste leaders like Chandrabose of TIP and other Ambedkarite movement leaders remain intrigued by the quasi-deification of Immanuel. Growing *mulaippari* (Sprouts), carrying milkpots and tonsuring heads shifts away from folk towards Hindu religious tradition. This can be seen as a form of co-option, and it is here that the influence of Thevar GP comes into play. The event, which was celebrated as an 'Anti-Caste Martyr's day', has seen the Pallars replicating the Thevars by trying to deify Immanuel in the same terms as Thevar. Chandrabose confirmed that the event became a GP after 2007.

He saw this shift as a counter performance to the Thevar GP, which was celebrated in a massive way following Thevar's centenary year. The ongoing processes of sacralisation certainly invested Immanuel within the affective tradition and the rituals of his GP rituals sought to solidify this.



Figure 32. A woman from Sellur carrying a brass pot highly decorated with Immanuel's image and peacock feathers.

At the *mandapam*, a group of youngsters brought the huge wreath (to be placed at Immanuel's memorial the next day). The procession reached the *mandapam* and once they were there, the women with the pots passed around the *mandapam* three times and handed over the pots, which were placed on the floor. The brass pot was placed at the centre, in front of the pedestal along with two other pots, and the remaining pots were placed beside the pedestal. On a *thamboolam* (tray), sacred ash, a cup of sandal paste and saffron was kept and a fresh coconut was broken as part of the ritual. Then camphor was lit and incense sticks were placed on the *thamboolam*. A bunch of freshly plucked neem leaves was also kept near the pots. Again there was another round of *kummi paatu* dancing, where songs praising Ambedkar, Immanuel, Krishnasamy and John Pandian were rendered. (Fieldnotes, Sellur, September 2015)

The imbrication of political mobilisation and sacralisation is captured here, as the *kummi* songs are an invocation of the leadership qualities of the Dalit icons; hailing Ambedkar, the anti-colonial hero Sundaralingam, Immanuel and the militant leaders of the 1980s and 1990s, John Pandian and PT's Krishnasamy. I see the essence of this ritual as the acting out of various parts, which, in the context of the whole, come together in a process of replication. Here, and as we will see in in the larger context of the GP day

events, the crowd does not remain outside the ritual but plays their part. In this way they may be invested with a sense of belonging and ownership, with a feeling of being part not just of the ritual but of the broader identity represented by it. It is important to note here that rituals animate participants and some become profoundly consequential because of their symbolic value (Oleson, 2015: 181): ‘Such iconic events influence at a distance and over time due to the sustained proliferation of representations, both textual- and image-based, perhaps even acoustic’. In the following section, I discuss how public space in Paramakudi town is transformed into a visual landscape during the main event on September 11.

Public Space and Politicised Aesthetics: The Language of the Images

Three days before the event, Paramakudi town was marked by both anxiety and ecstasy as members of various Pallar organisations and Dalit political parties moved busily around the town in the night in mini-trucks laden with casuarina poles and newly printed vinyl flex-banners, cut-outs and flags, erecting them in the allocated spaces. These visual signifiers are arranged late at night to ensure that traffic is not disturbed, and also to provide a surprise in the morning for onlookers and their own community members. Flexboards are temporary billboards made of vinyl sheets of various sizes and shapes tied to casuarina poles, and are a common part of the Tamil landscape. They are normally used for family-based events like weddings and ear-piercing ceremonies, or political meetings. Cut-outs are larger than life vertical billboards representing human figures. They most often depict film stars or political leaders (cf. Jacob 2009).

The aesthetic storming of Paramakudi town indicates the amount of work that goes into making this visually ornate landscape. Since there are strict restrictions on both the content and the usage of visual signifiers,⁶⁰ all these efforts were preceded by tedious negotiations with the office of the district superintendent of police and the district

60. In 2011, a Pallar organisation used the terms *Desiya Thalaivar Deiva Thirumagan* (National Leader and Divine Descendant) for Immanuel. This was opposed by members of the *Mara Tamizhar Sena* (Brave Tamils Army), a Thevar outfit and they filed a police complaint following which there was a peace talk to prevent further escalation. The District Police then issued an order not to print any controversial wording and to seek permission from the police before erecting banners. This incident was allegedly a precursor for police firing (Report on the Public Inquest on Paramakudi Firing, 2011).

collector, followed by approval from the concerned local police stations. This meant that proposals first had to be submitted to the leaders of the *Paramakudi Devendra Panpaattu Kazhagam*. These are the organisers of the event who carefully go through the wording and other visual materials used in the banners and posters and suggest changes. The multiple negotiation processes with governmental authorities are dealt with in a separate chapter, in the context of the emergence of restrictions and surveillance measures.

The physical preparations for the GP continue on the day itself:

I came out of the house at 6.30 a.m. and on the corner of street where I was staying, women gathered in front of a house to prepare the community meal.



Figure 33. Food for the community feast being prepared.

Bakkiyaraj told me that the TIP cadres would be packing the food and distributing it to the people participating in the event. ‘As the whole town gets shut down on the occasion of the event, there would be no hotels so we help them by giving food packets, similarly a few other organisations would be doing the same,’ he quipped. Tenkasi Siva (30) and Eswaran (27), ardent supporters of Krishnasamy who were paying homage the fifth time said, ‘We are quite happy to be here, though food is not a concern, we somehow are served with food packets by our local party leaders and none goes on an empty stomach.’ Hospitality, a crucial element of Tamil culture has made this possible (Fieldnotes, September, Paramakudi, 2014).

During the Thevar Jayanthi, we saw that massive *annadhana pandhals* were set up by leaders, however in the case of Immanuel GP, there is a lack of adequate space and of such visible political entrepreneurship in the community. A lack of funds was also cited as a reason for the more modest arrangements described here, but they still ensure that people who had travelled long distances were served food. I saw at least two neighbourhoods within the main town engaged in preparing lunch packets for the cadres who visit the memorial. This means that commensality, a crucial socialising space in such huge gatherings, and a time-tested way of winning community support for potential political entrepreneurs, is missed but nevertheless there is a sense of community created by the local provision of food.

As with Thevar GP, one of the prominent features here are visual signifiers:

The town's entry point had a few DMK, AIADMK, Congress and MDMK flexboards along with some from PT, TIP and TMMK. On the same long stretch of main road leading to the venue there was an aesthetic assault with dense and intense signifiers. As I was nearing the memorial, I couldn't see any flexboards from the major political parties. Though parties like VCK had a good amount of banners and flexboards, it was predominantly Pallar dominated parties like PT, TMMK, their organisations, and Pallar dominated villages who had set up these visual signifiers. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2015)

The aesthetic ordering at Immanuel GP is exactly the opposite of Thevar GP. In the case of the latter the ruling party, whether AIADMK or DMK, would occupy almost the entire space closest to the memorial, installing their visual signifiers to the exclusion of others. They thereby indicate their proximity to the Thevar community. In the case of Immanuel GP, all the mainstream parties occupy spaces at the starting point of the way to the memorial and the number of banners are minimal. It is the major Pallar groups, and Dalit organisations like VCK, which have flexboards nearest to the memorial. This indicates that the presence of mainstream parties in Immanuel GP is weak at best. Whereas, in the case of Thevar GP, the Chief Minister of the State or the opposition party's leader or general secretary is keen to attend the event to avoid slighting the Thevar community, in Immanuel's case the main parties are mostly represented by local Ministers or MLAs. This provides us with an idea of the power Thevars wield in electoral politics. It has become a political necessity for almost all the major parties to

showcase their affiliation or affection towards the Thevar community. Dalit writer Stalin Rajangam (Personal Communication, Madurai, September 2015) says, ‘since there is antagonism between the two communities there is a danger that the Thevars would perceive it as a form of disrespect to Muthuramalinga Thevar if the political parties give equal importance for Immanuel and that is a major reason for their neglect.’ Most of the Pallar signifiers carried messages of defiance often with martial or royal symbolism.



Figure 34. A huge banner on the Paramakudi five corner highlights the demand to announce Immanuel’s GP as a government sponsored event. His quote that, ‘Caste is a disease which continues from cradle to grave’ is included.

In accordance with Tamil political culture, the GP was also marked aurally.

The highly intense visual signifiers were backed by the aural presence of songs within the permitted locations and these hit the air continuously on the way to the memorial. The song *Poradada Vaazhendada* [as we saw earlier] was a song that one could never miss and other songs glorifying Immanuel, Ambedkar, Sundaralingam, John Pandian and Krishnasamy were played continuously at certain points on the way to the memorial. The visual signifiers showcased the complex nature of Dalit and Pallar politics; the anger of being an oppressed community, the emphasis for unity, and the desire to defy dominance could be seen in them. Bakkiyaraj pointing out to TIP banners explained to me, ‘Our banners and flexboards would be different from the rest of them you see here, it was carefully written and neatly designed with Annan Chandrabose’s guidance and it emphasises the need for a united Dalit cause’. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2015)



Figure 35. A banner put up by TIP also carries the images of the deceased during the Paramakudi police firing on September 11.

True to his observation, the banners of TIP (see figure 35) erected across the town carried revolutionary messages without hurting anyone and featured images of Marx, Ambedkar, Periyar and the Tamil liberation movement leader Tamil Arasan. The banners also carried images of those killed during the police firing four years ago. TIP in its ideological commitment to the ‘annihilation of caste’ and ‘unity of Tamils’, has been trying to fight for a united Dalit cause. Immanuel GP, organised by them as Anti-Caste Hero’s day, has seen major transformations but TIP continue to reiterate their commitment to that broader vision.

Buildings, squares, small bridges, roads and lampposts were decorated with brightly coloured banners and flags (red and green), arches and tribunes were erected. Flexboards depicting various aspects of Pallar history, myths, political aspirations and revolutionary moments were visible in prominent positions. The image of a seated Immanuel with legs crossed was the most important form, next only to Immanuel in military grab. Most of the images represented glorified aspects of the social life of the Pallars and the intermeshing of the symbolic plough and sword was repeated, valorising their imagined past as warriors and lords of irrigated lands. The flexboards, banners and cutouts were each sponsored by different Dalit forums, ranging from political parties to caste-based community organisations and individual families. Each came up with interesting visual content broadcasting their power, pride and defiance; the displays

included the name of the sponsors, sometimes their own images, a political message and a line or two about the great sacrifice of Immanuel. Rajendran, a committee member of the *Devendrar Panpattu Kazhagam*, said that the 2015 Immanuel GP featured close to three hundred flexboards and cutouts.

The political aesthetic in the Tamil Nadu is largely influenced by Dravidian politics and DMK in particular (Bate 2009). A carefully nurtured cultural aesthetic and visual culture of more than half a century led to a tradition followed by all the political parties in the state including the Dalits (Rajadurai and Geetha, 1996). Given the influence of Dravidian visual culture, it is important to understand the agency of the visual. The symbolism and political aesthetics here, extend beyond what the eye sees and provides value to the idea of Dalit assertion. As members of a historically oppressed community, invisible and unheard in social hierarchy, their choice of visual signifiers indicates their changed attitudes. The desire for visibility is aggressive. Not only the form, even the content according to Chandrabose reflected new political ambitions and subjectivities seen in the incorporation of ancient symbols within their new imagination. By mobilising the populace into colourful processions Pallar politics not only asserted symbolic control over the town, but invested parts of it with a new, revolutionary, significance. September 11 has become an important date in the symbolic calendar of Pallar politics.

Paying Homage

In this light, the act of paying homage is more than a ritual. It functions both as a marker of the growing impact of Pallars as a political community, seen in the rise of non-Dalit parties attending, and the potential transition of Immanuel as an icon.

When I reached the memorial at around 8 a.m., everything was set up for the event. I could see the grave of Immanuel, highly decorated with flowers, and there was a huge green banner carrying a profile picture (see figure 35) of him, with the words *Puratchiyalar Inge Vidhaikapattullar* (a revolutionary has been sown here). Police personnel headed by the Superintendent of Police were present at the venue.



Figure 36. The Immanuel memorial decorated with flowers at Paramakudi.

A group of a dozen youngsters belonging to the *Devendrar Panpattu Kazhagam* (Cultural Forum of Devendrars) forum in their white, green and red t-shirts bearing images of Immanuel on both sides and track pants stood around the gravestone, while office bearers, Punniyamoorthy, an advocate and the bearded James Vathiyar were performing crowd management, standing opposite the grave where small pandals were erected (one each for the forum, press, police and revenue officials). Each village or organisation who came to pay homage introduced themselves to the organisers of the event while entering the venue. They in turn announced the village or organisation's name along with the leader through the public address system. Sellur villagers placed the first wreath, as has been the pattern over the last few years, members of the *Devendrar Panpattu Kazhagam* followed them and placed a wreath and paid their homage. In quick succession as per timings allotted, the ruling AIADMK party cadres led by local minister and also a member of the Pallar community Dr. Sundararaj came with huge wreaths, which prominently displayed 'On behalf of Honourable Chief Minister Amma'. Immanuel's daughter and grandchildren came next. Former Minister Suba Thangavelan, along with former Adi Dravidar and Tribal welfare minister A. Tamilarasi (also a Pallar), led the DMK cadres and paid homage. VCK president, Thol. Thirumavalavan along with his party cadres paid homage and shouted slogans (Brave Salutes to the Equal Justice Revolutionary Immanuel), pledged to annihilate caste following Immanuel's path, and addressed the crowd, demanding a state function. Congress president EVKS Elangovan paid a visit to the memorial for the first time and announced that Immanuel was a great leader who fought for the uplift of the Dalits. MDMK leader Vaiko also came to the memorial for the first time, paid homage and commented that the people in the south should live harmoniously. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2015)

The drive to organise the event in an orderly manner, providing proper facilities for the press and government agencies, denotes the desire to secure state-sponsorship. Almost all the leaders paying their respects, with the exception of AIADMK and DMK, called

on the government to make it a state event. Both the Dravidian party leaders promised to make it a state event, a statement that they have been making since the early 2000s. The event is not state-sponsored, but given its magnitude and perceived law and order problems, the government authorities, with the help of *Devendrar Panpattu Kazhagam*, plan the itinerary for different political leaders and parties. In 2015, with Assembly elections around the corner and the growing importance of Immanuel GP, both Congress and MDMK⁶¹ leaders visited the memorial. The former does not have much influence in Thevar strongholds as they are seen as responsible for Muthuramalinga Thevar's death.

The crowd at the GP swelled mostly when prominent leaders came as they normally bring in more people to showcase their strength. At around 11 a.m., TMMK's John Pandian came with a huge crowd, to a rousing reception; he and his party workers raised slogans and paid homage. As supporters and people who came to pay homage all stood clapping and whistling to hear him speak, much to the chagrin of them, he just waved his hands and left the venue. One of the youngsters, Siva (25) from Parthibanur, who was standing nearby said in desolate voice, 'since he is in Amma's (Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha) *Kootani* (Alliance), he is reluctant to speak and avoids any controversy. The leaders have become selfish putting themselves above the community.' His friend Rajendran (28) from the same village responded, 'we need a leader like Thirumavalavan, who without fail attends the GP and addresses the crowd. If he was from our (Pallar) caste he would have become the big leader. Since he is a Paraiyar, who are less in number, he is unable to make it big.' (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2015).

Most of the villagers within Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar districts usually come in the late afternoon as they wish to demonstrate their strength in numbers. That is the reason why you have such huge crowd in the evening, according to Bakkiyaraj of TIP. The youngsters also wish to see their leaders; for example, there is an aura about John Pandian. The six-foot-three-inch-tall leader from Tirunelveli was among the most militant of Dalit leaders; he propagated and practised counter-violence as a measure to end caste discrimination. Now a shadow of his former self and with a slew of cases against him, he has become AIADMK's token symbol of the Pallars. It is a common political practice among the Dravidian majors to have different parties representing each caste within their alliances, thereby demonstrating their allegiance to them. The crowd

⁶¹ Vaiko presents himself as beyond caste differences and so paid a visit to the memorial. Partly because of this and an interview on inter-caste marriages, he faced a backlash from the Thevars, was prevented from garlanding a Thevar statue in Tuticorin district, and eventually withdrew from contesting the 2016 state elections (*The Hindu* 25, April 2016).

was quite disappointed that John Pandian did not speak but were delighted to hear Thirumavalavan (Paraiyar by caste) and was appreciative of his political moves. There is also a misconception about numbers and Rajendran's comment is indicative of that: leaders inflate the numbers and propagate them as a majority caste. The Paraiyars, not the Pallars, are the single largest caste among the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Regardless of the rights and wrongs in this case, the comments above, and choreography of the event, highlight the lack of unity in Dalit politics which is one reason why the Dalit vote is of less significance to Dravidian parties than that of the Thevars. The GP, however, is not just about politics.

At around 12:30, the crowd started swelling and a lot of women carrying milkpots and *mulaippari* came to pay homage. Hordes of people arrived, both men and women, dancing to rhythmic drum beats and carrying banners that displayed their village's names and organisations. Villagers from Kallikudi attracted a lot of attention as they came along with a drumming troupe and women dressed in green and red saree and a red and green head band and men were dancing. A woman in the group started dancing furiously and fell into a state of ecstasy. Bakkiyaraj who was with me said, 'Sir, every year they used to captivate the crowd with their dancing and drum beats. As time goes on you will see many such troupes from villages and today the whole of Paramakudi is for us. The town belongs to the DKVs but from tomorrow it will be normal.' (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September, 2014)

In comparison with the Thevar GP, more women are present here. There was a significant amount of freedom; a lot of women could be seen dancing and displaying their emotions and attachment. In the case of the former festival, the presence of women was a case of spiritual experience and a possible instance of pilgrimage, as the icon there was deified and the space has been converted into a temple. In the case of Immanuel, the participation of woman is more political. Though there are not any significant female leaders within the community, it is often believed that the Pallar women are assertive. 'Women within the Pallar community had always been at the forefront during times of trouble, in Ponniahpuram and Pambuvizhunthan villages in Ramanathapuram and Uthapuram in Madurai women have showcased extreme resistance against oppression,' said Ponnuthayi of TIP (Interview, Paramakudi September, 2015). In 2011, following the police firing, TIP had organised a massive women's rally on Immanuel's birth anniversary on 9th October. Such incursions into space, however, are limited.

Bakkiyaraj's closing comment about the ownership of public space is significant. It emphasises the momentariness of the act and how things then return to 'normal', which means that they are again reduced to being on the sidelines. During the Puja, though, they own the street:



Figure 37. Villagers from Kallikudi dancing on their way to the Immanuel memorial.

Members of TIP, led by their leader P. Chandrabose, performed a black shirt procession, raising slogans hailing Immanuel and Ambedkar and recalling their services and sacrifices to the community. From 2 p.m. onwards, with some exceptions like Ambedkarite trade unions and other SC/ST organisations, it was people from the Pallar villages and neighbourhoods who occupied the public space. A tightly packed mass of bodies, all through some form (either attire, or badge or flag or banner) wearing red and green, thronged around the Immanuel memorial (see figure 36). During their journey from the Paramakudi Main Road, the Dalits (male and female) were both loud and organised in their performance. I did not see any open performances of martial arts such as *silambam* (martial art using long sticks) or *surul veechu* like those during Thevar Jayanthi, where youngsters used to perform the martial art all through the route from Kamudhi Bus Stand to Pasumpon Thevar memorial, however, at the Immanuel memorial, a duo of grandfather and granddaughter performed *silambam* in front of Immanuel's gravestone to loud applause. Later in the evening during the procession, a beanpole of a youngster performed *silambam* when he came along with his villagers. In both cases, the performances were nowhere close to those at the Thevar Jayanthi events (Field Notes, September, 2015).

Martial symbolism and its various manifestations, such as *silambam* and *surul veechu*, is something that is consciously performed during the Thevar GP. *Silambam* has come to be associated with the Thevars and they do not fail to promote themselves as patrons

and practitioners wherever and whenever they get the chance.⁶² Not only during GP but also during other commemorative events they perform these martial arts in public spaces.⁶³ *Silambam* is not the only echo or replication of Thevar Puja:

At the memorial, women who had carried milkpots and men with coconuts performed the ritual of *abhishekham* (the anointing of the idol) in an unorthodox manner. In the small barricaded space next to the grave, they poured the milk and broke the coconuts. On the farthest corner of the graveyard, men were tonsuring their hair as part of the ritual (see figure 37). Raja (32) of Sankarankoil, who had just tonsured his hair, said ‘I don’t know much about Immanuel but I know that he fought for the uplift of the Scheduled Castes and is worshipped by many and by offering my hair I accept him as one of my deities.’ (Field Notes, September, 2014)

One of the reasons for the enmity between the Pallars and Thevars is captured here. The conscious sacralisation of Immanuel by Pallars puts them on a collision course with the dominant caste who are extremely jealous of their standing and their icon (cf. Pandian 2000). Lest readers remain in any doubt about the processes of replication and dissent entailed in the celebrations here, the climax of the day made the links clear.



62 The portrayal of *Silambam* as an art is common in Tamil films. They have the protagonist performing *Silambam* with ease to connote his bloodline as a martial caste. Major films include, *Thevar Magan* (1992) and *Mannvasanai* (1984). See, Srinivas and Kali (1998) and Karthikeyan and Gorringer (2017).

63 Deivam (41), PT's media organiser, said that a possible reason for the limited number of such displays during Immanuel GP is because of the policing. He felt that the event comes under a lot more surveillance than the Thevar GP because of its potential to incite violence.

Figure 38. A member of the Pallar community tonsures his head as part of the ritualised celebrations on the occasion of Immanuel GP.

In the evening, a lot of villagers walked towards the memorial and the whole of Paramakudi town was filled with people who were in one way or the other related to the counter-hegemonic politics represented by Immanuel. ... Krishnasamy's arrival was anticipated and his timing was perfect as the memorial was filled with people from neighbourhoods like Ponnaiahpuram and Pambuvizhunthan, which have a lot of active members working for the community, with drumming bands to pay homage. At around 6 p.m., Krishnasamy in a bright blue shirt (See Figure 39) entered, waving towards the ecstatic crowd who started clapping and whistling. After paying homage by placing a wreath, he took the mike and addressed the crowd. Known for his vociferous opinions, much to the delight of the crowd he took on the community's socio-cultural and political opponents and without mentioning names said, 'the government undertakes state-sponsored events for some random leaders but here lies a person who fought caste and feudal dominance and died as a martyr, shouldn't the state be celebrating his anniversary as a government event?' Krishnasamy was the last major leader from the community to pay homage, following which the event almost came to an end with just a few villagers paying homage. Late in the evening the cadres could be seen dismantling the visual signifiers, a day of unbridled energy and a sense of caste-based solidarity came to an end (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September, 2015).



Figure 39. PT founder president Dr. Krishnasamy addressing the crowd.

A Christian Grave and Hindu Rituals

Immanuel GP was an open inversion and subversion of Thevar domination. Through their public performances and occupation of space, the Dalits inverted the dominance of Thevars in the region and made themselves central. Through the process of replication, the event indicates how the structures of domination (political/economic/social) within Tamil society are subverted, negotiated, reproduced, transformed and, at times, overturned in culturally meaningful ways. By occupying Paramakudi town and decorating it with dense signifiers they brought public space under their purview. Socio-spatial contours were inverted through their public performances, including processions; through images of Ambedkar and Immanuel occupying the major parts of the town they indicated their allegiance to a more egalitarian social order based on constitutional justice and equality. The GP exhibits a wide array of resistance practices by Dalits against the pressures and prejudices levelled against them by state and non-state actors (for other contexts, see Doron and Rao, 2009).

We have seen how Thevars exercised power and dominance through myths, symbols, rituals, their strong self-perception as a martial caste and rulers of the land and other forms of symbolic power. This involved the creation and dissemination of a universe built on a symbolic discourse underlining their authority. During the Immanuel GP, the Dalits contest those symbolic constructions through their own visual practices and performances. There was a conscious effort to draw from literary tradition and ancient symbols to build an imagined counter-symbolic discourse. This act carries the danger of making the community live in a state of false consciousness, providing an escape from reality; nevertheless it also fosters self-empowerment. Motivated by the idea of replication, as we will see in Chapter 9, some Pallars have started to lay claim to a royal past and have been toying with the idea of discarding their Scheduled Caste status. The act of resorting to imagination cannot be seen as just a derivative discourse (Chatterjee, 1993), but as an act of defiance. The creation and transformation of Immanuel's death anniversary into a counter ritual can be seen as an active and conscious attempt at inversion. As a modality of defiance characteristic of the subaltern, Immanuel GP, functions as an attempt to destroy or appropriate for themselves the symbols of authority

of those who dominate them (cf. Kaviraj, 1995).

Immanuel GP's spatial location for the performance of such rituals is key to our understanding of 'inversion'. According to Kaviraj, in the Western context the transformation in the nature of public space happened through spectacles of inversion. Royals historically displayed their sovereign power through periodic spectacles in large public spaces, including military marches, assemblies and religious ceremonies. However, European history saw the transformation of these spaces through the increasing mobilisation of the urban poor (Kaviraj, 1997: 95). Popular forces gradually came to use the spaces in their own ways and subaltern classes started to hold marches and rallies of their own. These 'spectacles of inversion' showcased the power of the vulnerable, the victimised and the excluded. The annual Immanuel GP can be read as inverting social dominance by replicating the very social idiom of caste and using it as a tool of political mobilisation to challenge established codes (Karthikeyan, 2016). It is, thus, a 'spectacle of inversion'. Immanuel GP, though heavily influenced by Thevar GP, can be read as an effort to destruct the symbolic universe of Thevar authority by replicating them with their alternative symbolic authority (see, Scott, 1990, Bourdieu, 1991).

In 'performing the streets' (see figures 40 and 41), both physically and through visual signifiers, Immanuel GP marks an attempt towards the reversal of ranking and a new relation of equality. The language of defiance embodied in these performances of 'inversion' also carries a flipside. These performances are ingrained with possible forms of reconfirmation of a dominant discourse through replication. The last section will elaborate on these dangers. Though effervescent in nature, as it remains for a day and showcases how the Dalits are aware of the micro aspects of power, the event and its related performance do not alter the overall dominance or the terms of its discourse.



Figure 40: A villager dressed as Veeran Sundaralingam the lieutenant of Pulithevar who died while combating British forces.

The competition that the GP produces is not only based on the relationship with the dominant Thevars but also the state. It revolves around questions of according precedence or guaranteeing state inclusion and exclusion, all of which are terms of a dominant discourse. Ritual inversions have the capacity to leak over and affect political discourse and everyday life, potentially feeding into real rebellion. Immanuel Sekaran GP as a discursive operation presents an alternative to dominant statements of spatial and social ordering, a counter discourse to the existing power. A discourse of countering dominance is created through such attempts drawing on ideas, signs, symbols and spatial practices where inversionary tactics come into play. Power here may be viewed as the ability of certain groups to define others by spatialising power. By becoming aware of its various modalities and its workings, it becomes clearer how the marginalised can challenge such forms of power. The gaps in the exercise of dominant power thus provide the space for thinking imaginatively and geographically about emancipatory politics.



Figure 41. Paramakudi Main Road is full of youth and women from the Pallar community from various villages marching to the Immanuel memorial.

Immanuel GP is typically ingrained with a series of contestations of the social and spatial contours of life brought out through performative idioms. This was marked by efforts among the Dalits to produce a language of self-making which draws upon the oppressor and inverts it to showcase dissent (Karanth, 2004). Encouraged by political intervention (for example PT) and hopes for equality, the Pallars use Immanuel Sekaran's event as a counterpublic to assert different relations of power, different spatial prerogatives and different definitions of inclusion.

Immanuel Sekaran to Immanuel Devendrar

The Immanuel GP early on was perceived as a symbol of *Dalit* assertion, inviting Dalit leaders from as far as Punjab and Delhi, but it now stands at the cusp of becoming an event glorifying the caste pride of the Devendrars. I was able to witness the Immanuel GP twice as part of my fieldwork and through my interlocutors I saw a swing in the perception of the GP. During the years 2012 and 2013, there was a strong attempt to reduce the presence of Dr. Ambedkar's imagery, instead replacing it with kings and historical figures from the past, much like Thevar imagery (Karthikeyan, 2016: 209-210). Those Pallars and their organisations who owe allegiance to strong Tamil nationalist sentiments promote the view that associating as Dalits robs them of a distinct

separate identity as cultivators and former ‘rulers’ of the land. In connection with that, they propagate that using Ambedkar’s image stigmatises their identity and reduces them to Dalits and Scheduled Castes rather than Mallars. Therefore they use images of Veeran Sundaralingam, Immanuel Sekaran and Chera Chola and Pandiyan figures to associate themselves with a royal past.



Figure 42. Members of the Mallar Meetpu Kalam carrying a banner demanding that the Pallars be relieved from the SC list and be clubbed as MBCs.

Following widespread criticism, in 2014 and 2015 I saw many images of Ambedkar. Still as an event it captures the Dalit imagination and attracts both leaders and an enthusiastic crowd from other Dalit sub-castes. However, this attendance declines each year. Chandrabose attributes this to the intrusion of Hindutva forces propagating sanskritised versions of caste history stating that we are of royal lineage by choosing such terms as Devendra/Mallars. Chandrabose pointed this out as inimical to the Dalit cause and the practice of emancipatory politics and called for it to be stopped; this is an emerging danger looming large in Dalit politics and the Pallars could become targets for Hindutva’s political machinations. I will discuss this further in the conclusion.



Figure 43. Women carrying *mulaippari* as part of the procession to Immanuel's memorial.

Despite these debates, I view Immanuel GP as a mobilisation for equality. The event through the occupation of public spaces claims access to symbolic equality and demands that public spaces are common and easily accessible to all. This political act needs to be read against historical caste practices of disciplining, constraining and regulating Dalit bodies by denying them space in the public. In challenging local forms of dominance and power exercised by the Thevars, these efforts bring Pallars into direct conflict with the Thevars who bitterly resent their assertion. The efforts to rename and replicate the event as a GP in 2007 heightened tensions and led to the 2011 violence according to Simpson of *Odukkapattor Viduthalai Munnani* (Liberation Front of the Oppressed). He says,

The Thevars became anxious and hatred got heightened when the demand for announcing Immanuel's Memorial Day as a government-sponsored function started to gain momentum. Also caste Hindu rituals like *Mulaippaari* and *Paal Kudam* began in golden jubilee year and the Thevars could not easily accept the sight of a personality cult growing similarly to that of Muthuramalinga Thevar and also the fact that the Dalits would get social recognition as equal citizens, so they planned to disrupt the GP, either by fair or foul means, and that was when the Paramakudi police firing took place, where six Dalits were shot dead. (Interview, Devakottai, September 2014)⁶⁴

Though these processes of symbolisation are efforts to reverse caste discrimination and advance the production of a political community seeking claims to public space and equality, these processes carry, both in terms of political discourse and in the language

⁶⁴ Teltumbde (2011) makes a similar argument.

of governance, militant forms of political commemoration laced with violence. In the next chapter, I will discuss the implications of this and how it habituates violence.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Competitive Associationalism, Contentious Politics and Habituation of violence

The Immanuel and Thevar GPs are the saturation points of competitive associationalism and caste-based contentious politics in the region. Both events have become key avenues for the habituation of violence. Thevar GP, however, is legitimised as a government event, showcasing the caste dominance of the Thevars, whereas the authorities have dubbed the crowds attending Immanuel GP as unruly and a possible danger to security. It follows, therefore, that they are under surveillance by several government agencies during such gatherings (Jha et al, 2013). This chapter has two major sections. The first discusses three key themes: the competitive associationalism that marks both the spatial and cultural spheres of life between the caste groups, and how that leads to contentious politics and violence; the role of colours in contentious politics; and the presence of ‘exceptional violence’ that marks the spatial and cultural geography during particular events. By looking at the habituation of violence I seek to understand how the GPs and related events are policed. The second section uses ethnographic examples to explore everyday violence between the caste groups. Violence is not restricted to GP: there is a history of routine forms of violence that marks their everyday lives. The chapter thus addresses the spatial pattern and distribution of violence, the events around which narratives of violence are woven and the temporal structure of the violence.

Contentious Spaces

According to McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (McAdam et al, 1996: 17), ‘[c]ontention begins when people collectively make claims on other people, claims which if realized would affect those others’ interests.’ These claims range from ‘humble supplications to brutal attacks, passing through petitions, chanted demands, and revolutionary manifestos.’ Thus contention ‘depends on mobilisation, on creation of means and capacities for collective interaction’. In collective interaction in contentious politics, they argue, ‘at least one party to the interaction (including third parties) is a government:

an organization controlling the principal concentrated means of coercion within a defined territory.’ Collective interaction, they say, includes social movements, cycles of protest, and revolutions.

They downplay the spatial element in contentious politics. Soja’s (1989) work highlights that ‘the social and spatial are mutually constituting and inseparable’ (cf. Martin and Miller, 2000). Practices, representations, and social relations are embedded in spatial patterns that constrain subsequent social interaction; including the interaction we call ‘contentious politics’ (Tilly, 2000: 138). Martin and Miller observe how McAdam et al’s work enhances our understanding of how people come to engage with contentious politics in specific contexts, but they emphasise that historical and spatial contexts are central to these processes. ‘Spatiality is both context for and constitutive of dynamic processes of contention’ (Martin and Miller, 2003: 144).

Elsewhere, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly divide contentious politics into two subcategories, ‘Contained and Transgressive Contention’. Both these address, among other things, whether all the parties involved are established political actors and if innovative means of collective action are employed. In the context of this thesis, transgressive contention is most applicable. It consists of episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects. In the words of McAdam et al (2001: 7), ‘[t]ransgressive contention more often disrupts existing spatial routines in its setting, and more often involves deliberate occupation, reorganisation, or dramatisation of public space’.

Tilly discusses the spatial aspects of contentious politics on routine political life. These refer to the

‘contained contention of parades, parliaments, and public ceremonies, spatial routines with symbolic significance, which is then available for adoption, parody, or transmutation by participants in transgressive politics.’ (Tilly, 2000: 138-139)

He talks about contention’s transformative capacity in terms of the political significance of ‘particular sites and spatial routines’, for example, massacre sites becoming

destinations of pilgrimage and funerals as arenas for political expression. Miller and Martin's (2003: 151) review of McAdam et al's work, notes how processes of certification - an environmental mechanism referring to the 'validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities' - are crucial to determining how public performances are viewed; a group's engagement can challenge, complement or reinforce dominant practices in a polity. In this case, Thevar Puja has been certified by the government as an 'official event', whilst the commemoration of Immanuel Sekaran remains contentious.

Contentious politics carry the potential of violence and, in the context of South Asia, processions that are part of a social and ritual tradition provide one of the major opportunities for this escalation. Freitag (1989: 134-135) says that processions are part of the procedures by which a community 'delimits its territory'. Religious processions define the sacred space of the community, which becomes conducive for violence in certain contexts, since when one group's space overlaps with another's then those circumstances can prompt riots. The control and protection of sacred spaces has historically fed into religious conflicts, and this remains true. Not only sacred spaces have significant symbolic values and remain potential causes for communal conflicts, though, as numerous studies testify (see Pandey, 1990; Das, 1990; Jaffrelot, 1998; Gooptu, 2001).

Van Der Veer (1996: 154-176) argues that riots and rituals in India usually have a planned system and structure, with a strong association of identity and public space in both. A direct connection between ritual performances in public spaces and riots seems to be obvious in contemporary India. 'Riots and rituals both appear to play a significant role in the construction of social identities'. He suggests that they derive their meaning from how they relate identities to public space (1996: 155): 'The ritual nature of riots and the riotous nature of rituals are thus connected through discursive traditions on the nature of "self" and "other"'. Furthermore,

Public space here does not only pattern ideas of community but is itself, to an important extent constructed through ritual and rioting. The spatial factor is as much a result as a basis of conception of community. (1996: 155)

Public spaces thus derive their meanings in relation to specific contextualised repertoires, which are themselves processes where different players are involved in shaping, reshaping, structuring, restructuring and challenging meanings through spatial practices. In what follows we see how these dynamics play out in the Tamil context.

Caste as Routinised Violence

Competitive associationalism and contentious politics carry the potential to induce violence. ‘Violence is the assertion of power’ (Schröder and Schmidt 2001: 5). Paraphrasing Riches (1986: 8), they say that ‘it is an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and by (some) witnesses.’ They see violence as a ‘basic form of social action that occurs under concrete conditions, targets concrete victims, creates concrete settings and produces concrete results (1986: 6). Whilst such violence most often occurs around particular flashpoints, violence also informs the everyday lives of a society influenced by a caste hierarchy and has spatial dimensions. For Loomba, caste violence ‘is one of the most long-standing instances of the routinisation of violence, predating European colonialism although not unshaped by it, and now firmly enmeshed within the new global order’ (2016: 221). Despite legal enactments and constitutional abolition of untouchability in 1950, caste oppression remains.

Menon brings to the fore the discursive limitations on violence: ‘Arguably, caste violence – the daily humiliation and killing of Dalits – is the central faultline of Indian society (2006: viii).’ Whereas religious violence has attracted fine and impassioned scholarship, caste violence was neglected: ‘caste violence becomes object of reportage while communal violence becomes object of theorizing’ Menon (2006: viii). Viswanath (2015: 1) too sees that there is a lack of ‘sustained analysis of anti-Dalit violence’. There is little that can be compared to the ‘well-developed literature on the lynching of African-Americans’, though Dalit killings could outnumber them.

In scores of cases, the uplift/empowerment and political assertion of Dalits has resulted in a simultaneous increase in their oppression by dominant castes. Dalit assertion has been part of contestations that challenge the hierarchical social status of their superiors within the system. This assertion frequently translates into resistance and, as Gorringe (2006b: 237) argues, ‘in the resultant dialectic between resistance and repression, the boundaries of caste are constantly challenged or reinforced. One means of reasserting the status quo is the phenomenon of ‘extravagant revenge’.’ Caste violence has a much wider social impact; it influences the

spatial and social patterning of urban areas. It can also address the violence inherent in exclusive formations of identity, enabling us to understand how violence shapes people’s perceptions, actions, and ways of being in the world. (Gorringe 2006b: 240)

Following Gramsci, Kannan (2000) conceptualised violence against Dalits in Southern India as ‘immediate’ and ‘distant’. The former is violence in the physical form, where the State through its police or the dominant castes unleash violence against the Dalits. The latter refers to the ideological dominance of the Brahmanical social order and the dominance of the state, which influences the former. Immediate violence is expressed through coercion and distant violence through hegemony. He suggests that Dalit understandings of oppression and violence are influenced by the concept of immediacy and fail to comprehend ideological dominance at a distance. But Kannan’s conception denies Dalits any agency of their own to comprehend violence in its various forms. The State is not only a symbol of coercive power for Dalits but also a benefactor. As members of the scheduled caste category, Dalits have a complicated relationship with the state; quotas and reservations have helped them with education and employment opportunities.

Pandey discusses the need to investigate the pervasiveness of the spirit of violence the ‘enormity of the violence of the ordinary times – a violence that we hardly notice let alone attempt to describe’ (2012: 12). For him the routinisation of violence occurs not only in brutal acts of aggression and everyday exercise of power over women and disadvantaged communities, but also in the construction and naturalisation of particular

categories of thought. Categories of thought and action are constructed and naturalised in many ways, one of which is through the meanings attached to colours. Different social groups and political movements have assigned meanings to different colours, making them signifiers representing their ideologies.

Colours as Sources of Contentious Politics

The Tamil context is not unusual in politicising colours. Sawyer argues that colours are important elements in social movements and other community organisations, and important to our understanding of how collectivities are nurtured and developed (2007:53). He asserts that Tilly's work on 'contestation' was pathbreaking-but that, given the 'visual nature of these strategies', 'the neglect of the role of political colours and related symbols' is surprising. Fine et al (1998) contend that the political meaning of colours varies across time and space and is conditioned by cultural norms, and that 'the uses of colour symbolism permit colour to be seen as a collective representation, a conventionalisation by which society represents itself to itself.' They continue to state that 'Colour contributes to social meanings in institutional orders, stratification systems and identity' (1998: 443). Vernon (1993: 116) says that colours are an integral part of iconography; there are always newer forms of visual strategies to sustain the power of dominance or to contest it. Eaton (2012), in her work mapping the influence of colour within the frameworks of Indian nationalism, draws attention to 'colour's paradoxical, sometimes violent and sometimes magical status during the period of Indian nationalism and its postcolonial afterlives' and suggests that colour has the ability to animate things, to embody and transform social relations (2012: 62).

Thus colours help us to visually identify with a cause and also play a prominent role in engendering a sense of community. For example, in Madras Presidency, just before independence, EVR Periyar organised the *Karuppu Sattai Thondar Padai* (Black Shirt Volunteer Corps). Rudolph (1961) says that a conference of the Black Shirt Volunteer Corps was organised at Madurai in May 1946. Black shirts within the Dravidian social milieu highlighted the plight of the Dravidians with a militant edge, symbolising self-

respect, atheism and a rejection of the superstition that black brings inauspiciousness. Colours are also used to script identities and function as cultural and spatial markers in contemporary Tamil Nadu, and, in the process of marking boundaries, these results in conflict.

Of Wrist Bands and Lamp Posts: Colours as Fixed Expressions of Collective Identities

Colours are used to represent institutions and organisations, and Thevar and Dalit caste group members assign meanings to colours while scripting their identities. Colours on their own do not carry any particular set of meanings, but when interpreted within a cultural sphere, given the history of previous contexts and current beliefs and propaganda, their representations gain legitimacy in the public domain. Colours are strategically important in day-to-day life. Within the context of Thevar-Dalit contestations, the use of symbolic spatial strategies among the dominant and ascendant groups is at stake. These strategies include those that link everyday practice and the physical/material and cognitive mapping of the social space. Claims to the city or towns or important public spaces within the villages are an essential part of political and social practices of various groups. As part of this claiming, the groups deploy colours and images to recast power within the space, recovering visibility in the given context.

Some colours represent state power in visual forms. Mostly brutal in nature, the colour khaki is associated with state power and legitimate violence in the form of police uniforms. Social movements also follow conventions of colour to represent themselves and their ideologies to the public: Blue is associated with Ambedkarites and saffron with the Hindu right wing. Two sets of colours are significant here: yellow and red for Thevars and red and green for the Pallars. Though different organisations and groups have different flags and colours of their own, these colours form part of the chromo-imaginary of the Thevars and Pallars. For Thevars, red is associated with valour and yellow with auspiciousness. In the Pallar imagination, red indicates valour and green is associated with their traditional occupation of farming.

Like party symbols, colours have become part of social identities and are now used as spatial markers. Tamil Vendhar (24), from Vasudevanallur, a student wing leader of PT narrated how the use of colours to spatially mark their neighbourhoods has become a predominant practice, inviting social tension in many villages in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. Vasavapuram village in Tuticorin has a predominant Thevar population. In the village nearby Kalladiyur, only members of the Pallar community live. The Kalladiyur youth have painted red and green on all the electric lamp posts within the village, a practice now commonly found in Tamil Nadu's southern districts. Tamil Vendhar described one instance revealing the symbolic power of such painting (Interview, Tirunelveli, December 2014):

The Kalladiyur youth then also painted red and green on some electric posts within the Vasavapuram village. On seeing this the youth from the Thevar community gathered and as a counter measure painted yellow and red on the entire lamp posts in both Vasavapuram and Kalladiyur villages. These counter efforts started getting worse and was snowballing into a violent conflict, however the police intervened on time and conducted peace talks between the heads of both the communities and after warning the youth of both the communities; the paintings were replaced with coats of white paint.



Figure 44. Wall paintings with the prominent colours of green and red depicting Pallar leader John Pandian's social rights conference (left) juxtaposed with red and yellow Pulithevar's 300th birth anniversary (right) at Sankarankoil bus stand.

The Vasavapuram example indicates how the use of symbols and colours in public spaces is an example of competitive associationalism, indicating the challenges faced by Dalits in making village spaces more equal. The use of colours and symbols has become an integral part of Dalit politics; the erection of flagpoles and name boards in public

spaces and wall-writing contributes to what Cohen calls the ‘symbolic construction of a community’ (cf Gorringer, 2005: 194). These competitive forms of symbolism have seen a major high in the last few years, for example the photo above (figure 43) exemplifies it. The wall paintings on the Sankarankoil town bus stand show how the competing castes of Thevars and Pallars and their political outfits – Pallar leader John Pandian’s TMMK wall painting on ‘Social Rights and Pride Retrieval Conference’ and the All India Forward Bloc’s commemoration of Pulithevar’s 300th anniversary – jostle for public space to mark their presence. Dalit intellectual, Stalin Rajangam, commented on the above photo that, ‘twenty five years ago this wouldn’t have been possible or if possible would have resulted in a clash, the assertion on the part of Dalits spearheaded by various movements has brought these forms of spatial justice’ (Personal Communication September 2015).

Another instance of colour-based competitive associationalism hit national headlines thanks to an *Indian Express* report.

In this belt in southern Tamil Nadu known for violent caste conflicts between OBCs and Dalits, coloured wristbands are markers that tell children who is a friend, who isn’t ... It’s red and yellow for Thevars, blue and yellow for Nadars, saffron for Yadavs — all socially and politically powerful Hindu communities that come under the Most Backward Classes (MBC) category — while students of the Dalit community of Pallars wear wrist bands in green and red and the Arunthathiyars, also Dalits, wear green, black and white. (Janardhan, 2015)

Though the report refers to Tirunelveli, it is the same in almost all the southern districts, which are prone to being caste-sensitive. Similar cases of students wearing caste-coloured wristbands came into focus after a clash involving Dalit and Thevar students in Madurai.

During my fieldwork in Pasumpon, Chekkanoorani and Paramakudi during GP events, I encountered Thevar and Pallar students buying wristbands, lockets and stickers. For example, one student, Raja from Paramakudi said,

This practice of wearing caste coloured wristbands is a common practice among students in Paramakudi and no one is exempt from this. It is both a source of

pride and protection. Though there is a chance that I might get attacked in situations where I am a minority, as my wristband will indicate my caste, it has also protected me from attacks (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2014).

In Pasumpon during Thevar GP, a college student Senthur Pandian from Usilampatti highlighted the significance of coloured wristbands to group formation:

The wristbands not only function as a mechanism to protect ourselves but also help us identify new students who start their courses. It is not very difficult to identify students from our castes as we more or less guess them from knowing about their village and neighbourhood but still it is important to maintain a hierarchy and do not get mingled with others, so we are tying them not only with great pride but also consciously to form a community within the college (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014).



Figure 45. Coloured wristbands, lockets with images of Muthuramalinga Thevar (left), being sold at Pasumpon during the Thevar GP. Green and red wrist bands and images of Ambedkar, Immanuel (Right) are sold at Paramakudi during Immanuel GP.

These quotes give us an idea of how colours have been assigned meanings attached to particular caste identities and how they act as markers of collectivisation, protection and pride, while at the same time isolating others and making them vulnerable to violent attacks. Colours function as an important means of identification; wearing the wrong colours, revealing improper group affiliation and crossing boundaries, could be fatal. In the case discussed in Chapter 5, of three motorcycle-borne Thevar youth who were waylaid and stoned to death, it was reported that the youth were carrying red and yellow flags. In connection with the 2012 Thevar Jayanthi petrol bomb attack that took place on the national highway in Madurai, killing seven Thevar youth, members of the Thevar youth group pressing for litigation brought the survivors of the attack to the District Collector's office to submit a memorandum. One of the victims recalled,

We stopped the vehicle, seeing a red and yellow coloured t-shirt and headgear-wearing youth wave their hands to stop, thinking that the Thevar youth were in need of help but before we could guess they started throwing petrol bombs. (Field Notes, Madurai, November 2014)

His testimony speaks to the social significance of the colours. In another instance, the Thevar villagers in Usilampatti blocked PT members who were returning to Theni from Madurai after the office bearers meeting. They were asked to remove the flags. As Ilayaraja the district secretary related:

the moment we entered Usilampatti in our vehicles with red and green flags, youths in a two-wheeler whizzed past us and blocked our vehicles and soon we were surrounded by people on every side. They started abusing us and asked us not to use the flags in the Kallar Nadu and made us remove the flag and cross Usilampatti without creating any showiness (Interview, Theni, December 2014).

Ilayaraja told me that a few men shouted and dared Dr.Krishnasamy (who was expected) to enter Usilampatti. He also explained how on seeing the red and green flag colours they got angry and tried to remove it. Baskar Mathuram, the PT youth wing state secretary recalled how a convoy was attacked twice while crossing Usilampatti and that ‘the moment they saw the red and green flag, they got furious and blocked our vehicles with sickles’ (Madurai, November 2014).



Figure 46. The colours of Red and Green painted on the lampposts at Sellaipuram village main road near Madurai indicate that it is a village inhabited by Dalits and functions as a spatial marker.

During a two-day conference on political awareness, while discussing the Assembly and

Parliament elections, approaches to anti-Dalit violence and how to use SC/ST Atrocities Act, PT volunteers also spoke about the flag colours, and whether to alter the flag with an additional colour.

A few narrated instances of violent attack and wanted a new flag, but a few stressed how the colours green and red remain as part of the identity of both the Pallars and PT and there was no need to change that. (Field Notes, Mahabalipuram, 29-30 November 2014)

Definite visual strategies are followed by political parties and social movements, which indicates how colours are used not only in the symbolic language of political communication but are also invested with a potent cultural meaning which provides emotional identification. When the Thevar and Pallar colours are worn, either as sleeves or scarves, they provide an expression of collective identity and solidarity, externalising ideological affinities. The colours have also seeped into everyday life and are used as spatial markers (see figure 3).



Figure 47. Video grab from the film *Madras* (2014) shows blue paint being splashed across a disputed wall. Source: YouTube

Colours representing the politics of caste identity extend into popular culture. The PT leader Krishnasamy opposed the film *Komban* (Dir. Muthiah, 2015) stating it would create caste tension between Thevars and Dalits in southern districts. In his affidavit, (W.P. (MD) No. 4685 of 2015) he claimed that the villain was shown wearing a Red and Green wrist thread and was portrayed as an evil force that needed to be uprooted:

The film is showing the villain who has red and green thread tied around his hand, the colour is identified with the Pallar community and the colour incidentally also happens to be the colour of PT's party flag. The film has dialogues that would proliferate the existing antagonism between the Thevars and Pallars, the hero who hails from the Maravar (Thevar) caste says, 'Who is there in Ramanathapuram to oppose me?' (p.4)

The recent Tamil blockbuster *Madras* (Dir. Pa Ranjith, 2014) was a path-breaking effort to bring Dalit political culture to the screen. It revolves around a disputed stretch of wall that political parties compete over for advertising space in a struggle that takes both spatial and political forms (Gorringe, 2017: 183). The film's climax showcases how different political parties were keeping Dalits as pawns in their struggle for political power and denying them autonomy. The protagonist exposes the treachery of the parties. As an act of revenge and liberation, he brings the wall dispute to an end by taking a bucket of blue paint and splashing it on the portrait of the dominant party's founder on the huge wall (Figure 4). The use of blue metaphorically indicates the need to turn towards Ambedkarism. The film exposes the denial of Dalit autonomy under Dravidian duopoly. (For more on this, see Karthikeyan, 2011a; Rajangam, 2013; Gorringe, 2017.

The use of colours as a signifier to either resist domination or to create solidarity and script ideological commitment and identity is thus a common political practice in Tamil Nadu. Failing to appreciate this renders it impossible to understand the periodic outbursts of violence around caste. It is because such identities and antagonisms are part and parcel of daily life that violence may be seen as a mode of political communication. In the following section, I will discuss competitive associationalism and the state's perception of it.

Competitive Associationalism, Guru Pujas and the Habituation of Violence

Competitive associationalism has increased the sensitive nature of relationships between the castes. Some legal documents exemplify the state's perception of this phenomenon. For example, in *Sanker Ambedkar vs The Superintendent of Police, November 26, 2010*, regarding permission to conduct a demonstration near the Municipal Office in

Manamadurai, Sivaganga district, the counter affidavit filed by the Superintendent of Police stated that,

The place where the proposed agitation is demanded is a sensitive area, and recently in that area Immanuel Sekaran GP was celebrated and now the Marudhupandiar memorial celebration and Thevar GP event is going to take place and even after the celebrations are over for long period there will be apprehension of breach of peace and creation of law and order problem and this will lead to communal disharmony...

Though the Court subsequently upheld the application, this response highlights the sense that competitive associationalism, prevalent in southern Tamil Nadu, has created a volatile situation. In another instance, while dismissing a Writ Petition ((MD) No.12537 of 2010) for permission to celebrate the birth anniversary of Pulithevan, the Madurai Bench of Madras High Court observed that it was

disheartening to note that casteist forces are raising their ugly heads often. This Court is aware that southern part of Tamil Nadu is communally very sensitive. Any untoward incident would definitely create communal tension, law and order problem.

In a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed in 2013, R.V. Thangavel, president of the *Devendra Kula Vellalar Sangam*, stated that because the Mudukulathur Court is housed in a building belonging to Maravar Sangam, those from the minority community and SCs cannot access the court. It is a 'caste sensitive area' where the dominant community of Maravars (Thevars) have frequently threatened those from the SCs. Rajendran of TIP (Interview, Paramakudi, September 2015) said, 'the very location of the building in the Thevar locality, given the history of antagonism and oppression, give us a psychological feeling that justice is being denied. Given the prominence of Thevars in police and other administrative sections, it adds to it'.

In 2005, the police and revenue authorities declined the PT request to conduct conferences in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu request. PT challenged this decision, demanding that the impugned orders were arbitrary and violated fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of India. However, in all the counter affidavits (W.P. (MD) No. 9069 of 2005), it was claimed that the request for conducting the procession and the meeting was rejected after a careful analysis, which predicted breaches of peace and

communal clashes. The affidavit reads,

It is a highly sensitive place, where already several persons were killed in caste clashes, 24 persons belonging to Scheduled Castes, 12 belonging to Nadar caste, 8 belonging to Thevar caste and one other caste in the last 15 years. In the year 2001, the Thevar statue at Rajapalayam was garlanded with slippers leading to violence. In 2005, members of PT during a public meeting were found throwing soda bottles at Thevar statue, which led to a skirmish.

The Court observed that public processions often result in violence. In Sankarankoil, the Justice Mohan Commission report attributed the tragedy of 17 people drowning in Tamirabharani river to the failure of political leaders to control the crowd and instead inciting them to unruly behaviour (Gorringe, 2005: 297-8). In Paramakudi, in 1996 a communal riot resulted in three murders due to a procession followed by a bandh organised by the *Devendra Kula Vellalar Sangam*. The Court also recalled that in 1998, in just one month, 23 cases of caste clashes were registered between Thevars and Dalits, in which 13 Thevars and 7 Dalits were injured. Hence, from the year 1999 the administration decided to proscribe any conferences by the Thevar and Dalit communities.

The above provides us with a clear picture of the existing social relations and recent instances of antagonism, which bring to fore contentious political dimensions and spatial mobilisation. It also illuminates how the state perceives the assertion of Dalits as a potential marker of violence. Given the emphasis on 'sensitive areas', some interpersonal conflicts may acquire – or be described as having – the characteristics of a caste dispute (Mosse 2012). That said, it is also clear that in this febrile atmosphere, antagonism between caste groups can escalate rapidly.

I now turn to the GPs and consider how they may habituate violence. As the most significant marker of competitive associationalism between these two castes under study, the GPs have become sites of violence. 2011 and 2012, particularly, were marred by large-scale violence. In 2011, it was state violence; 6 Dalits were killed and others injured in police firing, following a small protest over rumours that one of their leaders, John Pandian had been arrested. Such violence is only comprehensible in light of the

discourses around endemic violence and ‘highly sensitive places’. These accounts are not simply descriptive, but feed into perceptions, fears and emotional dynamics on the ground. Given the history of antagonism between Dalits and Thevars, the former were left with reason to believe it was a conspiracy hatched by the Thevars (cf. Teltumbde, 2011); AIADMK was in power and there exists a precedent in the Kodyankulam episode of violence. A case of police excesses in an upwardly mobile Dalit village, Kodyankulam in the Tuticorin district later led to the *Then Maavatta Kalavarangal* (southern district clashes). (Narula, 1999; *Frontline*, December 11- 24, 1999).

Simpson of *Odukkappattor Viduthalai Munnani* (Front for the Liberation of the Oppressed), claimed that the 2011 police firing and resultant violence during Immanuel GP was pre-planned. He pointed to a series of murders that had taken place since 2007, which was Thevar’s centenary and Immanuel’s 50th year, with a Dalit murdered every year.

But the Thevars executed the murder only with the intention to disrupt Immanuel’s GP. Their expectation was that if there is a riot, the government will stop the GP citing law and order problems and can brand the Dalits as rioters. (Interview, Devakottai, September 2014)

He argued that Thevars were unable to digest the growth of Immanuel’s GP as an event in competition with Thevar GP. Simpson filed a suit in 2007, requesting a ban on the Thevar Centenary Celebration that year, because it was nothing but an event to showcase their caste pride, dominance and hatred towards Dalits. This being the case, the Thevar centenary celebration would create tension and the potential for riots. However, the suit was rejected and the response stated that Thevar GP is a government function and the court cannot interfere in government policy. State recognition – or certification - is a key factor here: it legitimises not only their mobilisation but also provides them with the necessary capital to exert dominance through the various modes of visual communication previously discussed. The domination here is more or less institutionalised with the governmental machinery in place to provide access and visibility. Only in recent years, through the use of dense visual signifiers, have Dalits challenged their comparable invisibility.

In the year after the Paramakudi shooting on 30th October, 2012, in an act of vengeance for the state violence, a SUV full of Thevar (and two non-Thevar) men on their way back to Madurai from the Thevar memorial was waylaid and attacked with petrol bombs. Earlier that day, some Thevar men had defied a ban on entering Ponnaiahapuram village and been beaten to death by an irate mob. Given the intensity of caste-based mobilisation around these events, it came as no surprise that the Thevars retaliated on the same night. Armed men entered the Dalit hamlets of Anaikulam and Kulalikulam, in Virudhunagar, and attacked 7 Dalits. One man, Karuppan, died of his injuries at the Government hospital in Madurai (*Times of India*, 3 November 2012). The following week was filled with violence and, both Dalits and police became targets of Thevar angst (Sundar, *The Hindu*, 7 November 2012).



Figure 48. Leaders of the *Thevar Kula Kootamaippu* leading the funeral procession of the victims of the Thevar Jayanthi petrol bomb attack at Goripalayam in Madurai. Photo: K. Antony Xavier ©

The foregrounding of caste pride and militancy in GP events, serves to prime violence. In 2013, at Gopalamudram village near Tirunelveli for example, Dalit students of the local school – located in a Thevar dominant area – refused to accept sweets distributed as part of Thevar GP. This ensured tension and clashes between the Dalits and Thevars. The Dalits consequently demanded a separate school (Ravishankar, 2015). As a result of this scuffle, on 2nd November, a Pallar youth was murdered (FIR Cr. No 483/2013). Likewise, in 2016, in Vagaikulam, on Thevar Jayanthi, Thevar youth sped through Dalit settlements on motorcycles, shouting slogans praising their community and making

derogatory remarks about the Dalit community. They also played pro-Thevar songs from loudspeakers and when the Dalits opposed this they were beaten, one Palanikumar who got injured later died at the Government Hospital in Madurai. It was alleged that Palanikumar had earlier defaced a marriage poster bearing the image of Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar (*Times of India* 2 November 2016; *The Hindu*, 2 November 2016).

The association between caste commemorations and enmity has been widely noted. For instance, an attempt to organise a GP for Kader Batcha, alias Vellaichamy Thevar, a former MLA with the DMK and a disciple of Muthuramalinga Thevar. A Dalit owing to a previous enmity murdered Kader Batcha and his son filed a petition demanding permission to organise a GP. This was heavily criticised by the Madras High Court, which stated that this syndrome of organising Guru Pujas, which result in violence, should be banned altogether (Criminal OP (MD) No.12925 of 2012).



Figure 49. A Poster put up near S. Puliyanagulam remembering the victims of the October 2012 Thevar Jayanthi petrol bomb attack near Madurai.

These incidents of violence indicate the changing nature of social relationships in the southern districts; the 1990s marked the ascent of the Dalits, which challenged the

dominance of the Thevars. The Thevars felt their ideological hegemony slipping and indulged in domination mediated by violence (Kannan, 2000). However, the Dalits in the region – infused with strong leadership and new social movements like PT – countered the Thevar violence with their own forms of violence. The damage in terms of lives lost and properties looted became more or less equal and the Thevar leaders grew concerned about Dalit resistance.

The Dalit youth are being brainwashed and are becoming naxalites, the petrol bomb attack was unexpected and this needs to be checked, otherwise there would be large scale damages to the Thevar community. (Interview, Murugan Ji, June 2015)

Following the petrol bomb attack, the leaders of *Thevar Kula Kootamaippu* organised a meeting in Usilampatti. All the speakers talked about the need to protect the Thevar community from attacks by the Dalits. This shows how marginalisation is challenged through speaking the same language of violence used by the dominant castes. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Thevar GP became more visible. In response, the Dalits too started celebrating Immanuel's anniversary in a big way. By the late 2000s, violent incidents marked the region. The intensity of caste clashes between the Dalits and Thevars in southern districts following GPs has become a great concern for the administration and general public as it frequently brought life to standstill in the southern districts. The configurations of violence between the Thevars and Pallars are changing (Pandian, 2000). The incidents where Thevars were under attack indicate the declining dominance of the Thevars in the southern districts, in terms of both their ideological dominance and physical violence against the Dalits. The emergence of *Thevarina Padhugappu Peravai* (Forum to Protect Thevars) and *Thevar Kula Kootamaippu* exemplify the community's vulnerability. In a meeting organised to bring solidarity between various backward castes (specifically to isolate the Dalits) organised by *Thevarina Padhugappu Peravai* a leader representing the Vellalars, Ganeshan, pointed out that

If a community like the Thevars are seeking protection and are floating such a forum imagine the fate of others, this Dalit threat is a reality and needs to be addressed. (Field Notes, Madurai, October 2014)

Responding to such concerns, the state government has introduced restrictions on both the GP events in a bid to avoid caste clashes. In the following section, I will discuss the restrictions imposed by the State and how the communities receive them.

Controlling Caste Conflict? Guru Puja Restrictions

Since 2012, the government has restricted the use of hired transport vehicles for mobilising people, and it maintains that the crowds and the number of vehicles were reduced. They claimed that in 2013 the entire function went off peacefully without any untoward incidents. The District Collector of Ramanathapuram's order (RoC.C2.09/2015) was circulated through the Superintendent of Police, prohibiting meetings of five or more people, the entry of buses, and the carrying of torches. The restrictions extended to permission for wall posters and banners. Members who wished to put up posters and flexboards were advised to seek permission from the local police station. The content of visual material, including slogans, also has to be approved. The zones for putting up posters and boards were earmarked by the police. Printers and workers who erect the advertisements were warned not to help supporters circumnavigate the restrictions.

In response to the state ban, a petition *T. Kamaraj vs The State Of Tamil Nadu on 10 September, 2013*, by the Thanjavur secretary of the *Tamilaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam* (Federation for the Progress of Tamil People) demanded that the ban should be lifted, arguing that the 'party volunteers and the organisers want to assemble peacefully, without arms, for paying homage at the memorial' (Writ Petition (MD) No.15017 of 2013). However, the Government in its response said that Immanuel GP had often led to the need for the police to use force. It also said that such mass mobilisations, involving the mustering of volunteers from different places to one centre, often travelling through villages inhabited by people of other castes, led to clashes between rival groups, damage to properties and arson. To prevent conflict, the government laid new roads to facilitate the smooth movement of those attending GPs and prohibited movement through certain sensitive stretches, yet they violate these

restrictions (Writ Petition (MD) No.15017 of 2013).

During my fieldwork, the heavy policing at the events was immediately evident:

On the morning of 28th October, riding on a motorcycle along with a friend from Madurai to Pasumpon, we were expecting to follow Murugan Ji's convoy. As we joined the Madurai-Sivaganga road, we had a glimpse of how the event is being policed. There was a huge check post at the entry point with a watchtower and a large posse of policemen to scan the vehicles. And at every vantage point on the earmarked route there were policemen and check posts and the villages of members of Dalit communities including both Pallars and Paraiyars were highly policed with additional force. (Field Notes, Madurai, October 2014)

The unprecedented restrictions on celebrating Thevar GP meant that the community members were unable to celebrate GPs in their respective villages, but also unable to come to Pasumpon in the usual hired vehicles and two-wheelers. Only privately-owned vehicles were allowed. The Court order had said that there would be no restrictions on celebrating in the villages, but this proved to not be the case. Kaaku Veeran of Usilampatti, a regular visitor to Pasumpon during Thevar GP lamented that some of the villagers who came with him from Usilampatti suffered, including elderly women:

Though the higher officials said that there would be no vehicle check, right from getting permission to attend the GP at the local police station for a vehicle pass, till we reached Pasumpon our vehicles were checked at multiple places. Three different passes were given from Madurai to Pasumpon at major check posts. All the members in the vehicle were asked to get down each time. (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

In a writ petition (W.P.(MD) No.14415/2013), S. Raja Maravan of *Thevar Ina Ilampuligal* (Thevar Community Young Tigers) contended that, as per the Hindu customs and rituals, GP was conducted every year as a right conferred by the Constitution. By prohibiting the use of hired vehicles the state is indirectly preventing the community from uniting to celebrate their leader's birth anniversary. However, the Madras High Court dismissed the petition. *Thevar Desiya Peravai's* founding leader, K.C. Thirumaran stated that it was unjustified to remove the signs of an established political party like the Forward Bloc, and that while Thevar was a freedom fighter, Immanuel Sekaran was casteist (*Thevar Malar*, September 2014: 44)

Thirumaran here, unwittingly reinforces the Government rationale by pouring scorn on Dalit mobilisation, belittling Immanuel and asserting the dominance and power of the Thevars. His account taps into a widespread feeling of anxiety and uncertainty in the community:

As I was discussing these restrictions with Ramasamy Thevar at Pasumpon, a group of community elders and youth who had gathered there stated that all the restrictions imposed indicate a vested interest to permanently ban the Thevar GP. They cited the prohibiting of signboards indicating caste affiliation through colours or flags and the removal of flagpoles and boards of the FB party by the police under the guise of removing caste associations. The accusation is that a recognised political party is being branded as a caste-based party due to the local predominance of Thevars in their number. One of their major complaints made was that the Dalits were given leniency; for example, Bala of Pasumpon stated that ‘even in the removal of name boards and flagpoles there was differential approach as there was a demand to remove the name boards of Ambedkar and Immanuel at the Kamuthi weekly market but the police refused to act on it and even after many stages of protest finally they covered it with black paint.’ (Field Notes, Pasumpon, October 2014)

During my fieldwork in Ramanathapuram, most of my Thevar interlocutors mentioned this repression, linking it to the CTA and claiming that their defiance continues from colonial times. They said that, in the name of bringing peace, the police were denying people the right to express their association towards a particular ideology or a community. In the case of name boards at the weekly market in Kamuthi, the Thevars alleged that the bus stand, though named after Muthuramalinga Thevar, carries no image of Thevar. In comparison, the *Vaara Sandhai* (weekly market) located in Kamuthi has been named after Ambedkar and at the front there is a board saying ‘Dr. Ambedkar Weekly Market’ carrying the images of Ambedkar and Immanuel. Vignesh angrily asked:

‘On government run institutions and buildings who gave the authority to have such name boards?’ The Thevar youth in Kamuthi organised a protest and successfully made the authorities blur the image of Ambedkar and Immanuel during the two months of imposed restrictions for GP. (Field Notes, Mudukulathur, October 2014)

For most Thevars, therefore, there is a widespread condemnation of the official treatment of Thevar GP and that of Immanuel. Most of the politically active Thevar

youth members, both in Madurai and Ramanathapuram, maintained that Immanuel had no photograph and a Pastor from TTS drew his image. But Thevar images and statues abound, and government authorities continue to venerate Thevar, as we saw with the delivery of golden armour by the AIADMK Chief Minister. The anger of the Thevars is disproportionate and arguably reflects their frustration that a 'caste of warriors' can be subject to state control.

Both in terms of their resistance to domination and their efforts towards upward mobility, the Pallars have been challenging Thevar dominance. It is to their responses that we now turn. In the case of Immanuel GP, the Dalits also blame the state; they too allege that double standards are being practised and that the state sides with the dominant castes. During the Immanuel GP in 2015, I broached the subject:

Chandrabose of TIP is a regular attendee of negotiations between the district administration and the organisers. ... He said that the revenue authorities advised for a blanket ban on flexboards. The issue was taken up with higher officials for negotiations and in the final meeting, which took place on 3rd September 2015, it was decided to follow all the restrictions imposed and ban all types of hired vehicles from carrying volunteers. Representatives of *Devendra Panpattu Kazhagam* (Cultural Forum of Devendras), the main organisers of the event, agreed to abide by the restrictions imposed and to extend their cooperation for the peaceful conduct of the event. 'Finally after negotiations, we were able to get permission for flex boards and posters inside Paramakudi for three days from 8th September and this idea, to be seen, remains a big concern for the oppressed castes' quipped Chandrabose. (Field Notes, Paramakudi, September 2015)

Far from exempting Pallars from scrutiny and disciplinary power, in other words, attendees at Immanuel's GP cited similar concerns to those voiced by the Thevars.



Figure 50. The image of a barrage balloon (yellow) up in the sky was fitted with a high-resolution camera at work at Immanuel Sekaran GP, to prevent violence.

Apart from the ubiquitous police presence and the strategically placed riot control vehicles, a highly visible barrage balloon with a high-resolution camera was hung near the venue, along with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). The SP N.M. Mylvahanan claimed that,

For the first time this year, we have decided to introduce a camera-fitted Blimp to get an enhanced aerial view for better crowd management and automatic number plate recognition system to virtually scan the vehicles coming from other districts. (Scott 2015)

The policing and surveillance measures for the Immanuel GP exemplify that the perceived threat and accompanying security measures have reached unprecedented levels. Although not much attention was paid to these surveillance measures, a few youngsters raised concerns about the general restrictions as part of an attempt to contain both the visibility and the growing stature of Immanuel GP, and to prevent it from becoming the most important public event in southern Tamil Nadu.

P. Chandrabose asserted that these forms of surveillance are an attempt to stifle Dalit assertion, but unlike the Thevar interviewees he felt that during the last two years the crowd has swelled beyond the authorities' expectations (albeit starting from a lower base than Thevar Jeyanthi).

They forget that the history of Dalits in southern Tamil Nadu is marked by martyrdom, starting from Immanuel to the victims of police firing, to [the] Unjanai carnage, it has been a history scripted through violence unleashed on Dalit bodies. (Interview, Chandrabose, Paramakudi, September 2015)

This observation resonates with the crucial axis of Dalit-subject formation where the logics of sacrifice and commemoration come together (Rao, 2009: 258). It also foregrounds the dual nature of subaltern counterpublics, as ‘spaces of withdrawal and regroupment’ and as ‘bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics’ (Fraser, 1990: 68). In this process they ‘offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies’ but they retain an emancipatory potential (Fraser, 1990: 68). For all the restrictions imposed on them, both events remain high-points of caste mobilisation and identity formation. In what follows, I draw on fieldnotes to analyse the events themselves and how they serve to habituate violence.

Masculine Ideologies and the Nature of Public Performance

Political performativity comprises the construction of images and spectacles, forms of speech, dress, and public behaviour that promotes the identity of a movement or party, defining its members and promoting its cause or worldview. Thevar GP attracts throngs of devotees clad in the Thevars’ chosen yellow and red. They march in unison, singing and chanting forcefully as they descend on the temple dedicated to Muthuramalinga Thevar. They make their way to his temple in vehicles or on foot, making public assertions as they go. Most of these are either expressions of their caste pride (*Indha Mukkulathu Padai Podhuma Innum Konja Venuma*—Is this force of Mukkulathors enough or do you need more?) or insults directed at the Dalit icon Immanuel and at Dalit communities writ large (*Thevar na Massu Immanuel Engalukku Thoosu*—Muthuramalinga Thevar is a mass leader, Immanuel for us is equal to dust; *Kaveri Thenpannai Paalaru Krishnasamy Mandaila Kolaru*—Cauvery Thenpannai (both rivers) Palar, Krishnasamy has gone nuts in his head). Most of the slogans refer to the deified Thevar as an immortal who cannot be compared to mere mortals. In addition to

assertions of masculinity through competitive denigration, mock performances of martial arts like *silambam*, sword fighting and torch relays form part of the event.

A team of youth dressed in saffron veshti was demonstrating *silambam* (a traditional stick-based fighting style) and *surul vaal veechu* (the Swinging of a Steel Blade Sword, a three or four bladed steel leaf which looks coiled but when swung swiftly it opens up and is a potential weapon) on the Kottaimedu area near Kamuthi amid loud claps and whistles. Marudhu a lean and muscular youngster who led the group said, 'we observe fast for 60 days from September 1 till October 30 and during this time we wear the *kaapu kayiru* (protective amulet) and abstain from all vices.' On showcasing this *Silambam* and *Surul Veechu?*, he said that 'this demonstration was not to showcase violence but 'our traditional martial sport' and to put across the history that the Thevar community, as guardians of Tamil society, was majorly involved in defending our homeland.' (Field Notes, Pasumpon, 29 October 2014)

Through their public performances the youth were depicting what are now seen as elements of Thevar masculinity. Using an array of already popularised signifiers in both the cultural and political domains, the male body is revered through the figures of sword-wielding medieval heroes (Pulithevar, Marudhu Pandiar) who symbolise the community's valour and honour. Carrying a chequered history as warrior castes, the Thevars imagine themselves as ideals of masculinity, contributing to the modern stereotype. However, the stereotype does not stand on its own, as it requires the construction of a countertype. This is evident in their attempts to denigrate and mock the lower castes and Dalits in particular, with whom they have a long history of antagonism (Mosse 1985).

Another visual representation is a bloody martial dance, the *Thevar Aattam*. This involves the piercing of the dancers' sides using small spears, which stay in situ throughout the performance. An ecstatic form of dance with blood dripping from the sides accompanied by drumbeats, it is also known as *Silakuthuthal Aattam* (see figure 51).



Figure 51. A bloody performance: Men from Thanjavur perform the *Silakuthuthal Aatam* or Thevar Aattam during Thevar GP at Pasumpon. The spears pierced through their sides are visible.

The ritualised activities often embody social memories crucial to a group's image of itself, and this is true of Thevar GP. Performance there is a process that grants power not only to performers, but also to all engaged in the action of evaluating that performance. Here the meanings of the social identity created by the performances are arrived at collectively, contingent upon the specific performative contexts. Thevar community leaders, politicians and nationalists gather at Pasumpon and offer oratory that soaks the members of the community in pride. This contributes to the perseverance of the community. An array of symbols speaks for the Thevars; ancient and medieval chieftains, and political, cultural and film heroes provide prominent emblems of their unity. Significantly, these predominantly male heroes represent both an unbroken connection to a heroic Thevar past and a "bold" Thevar masculine character that speaks to the existing Dravidian rhetoric. The GP performances serve a dual function – to remind others about who dominates the public space, and to affirm bonds within the imagined community of Thevars. Cultural performances like Thevar GP must be read

contextually, as an emergent form of communication that addresses specific social and political dynamics inherent in the prevailing social structure. The social memory celebrated and reproduced at Thevar Jayanthi represents a Thevar golden age of masculine martial heroism. However, these performances also provoke dissenting views that undermine those positive visions. The stature of Thevar is protected by attacking any who are seen to insult or belittle their leader; the school student Palanikumar was murdered on 9 September 2011 for allegedly scribbling denigrating remarks against Thevar on the walls, and another Palanikumar, of Vagaikulam village was murdered for allegedly insulting Thevar by smearing cow dung on his poster (Jaishankar and Karthikeyan 2011; Report of Public Inquest on the Paramakudi Firing, 2011; *The Hindu*, 2 November 2016).

Rituals are double binding in nature; as a process they integrate individuals into a community of participants, but they set that group apart from those who do not participate. Moreover, in many cases, they portray “the other” as “threatening” and “impure”. Such a conceptualisation encourages ritual action to exorcise, subjugate or conquer the presence of others. In addition, through these rituals, a sort of legitimacy is given to the appropriation of public spaces. Invasions of these spaces become a political affair; any form of desecration or invasion of public spaces sparks violence. Processions highlight the contested nature of spatial zones and lay claim to territories. For the dominant sections it is a question of maintaining ‘spaces of privilege’ and for the weak it is a struggle to attain equality through access to certain spaces. In the case of GPs, the contestation is bound by questions of caste and revolves around physical incursion into such spaces as violations. This is evident in how assigned colours formed a significant part of the identity formation and functioned as spatial markers.

The previous chapters have explored how processions visibly express collective identity, here I consider how they produce violence.

Vellaiyapuram is a Dalit neighbourhood in the highly caste sensitive region of Kamuthi. A colony of 200 households, it is on the assigned route to reach Pasumpon village. At the entrance of the colony we can see statues of both Ambedkar and Immanuel. Accompanied by Bakkiyaraj, I met Rajkumar,

Deputy Secretary of Pattali Makkal Katchi (the Toiling People's Party) and Devendrar Ilaigar Ezhuchi Peravai. I asked him about the statues. He said: 'It's a colony, surrounded by Thevars, there was so much pressure while erecting the statues. They (the Thevars) are both economically and politically powerful and if we start seeking permission to build statues we would never get it, so we ourselves forcibly went ahead and started erecting the statue.' I enquired if Thevars had opposed this: 'They said that it was Poromboke land and you cannot install statue, but it was a building unveiled by former Minister Kakkan. With all this the villagers went ahead, showcasing resistance, and brought Krishnasamy and unveiled the statue. The Thevars were angry and on his way back to Madurai after unveiling the statue, Krishnasamy's convoy was attacked near Kottaimedu but we had to suppress this information in order to prevent violence.' (Interview with Rajkumar, Vellaiyapuram, September 2015)



Figure 52. The statues of Ambedkar and Immanuel Sekaran behind iron grills at the entrance of Vellaiyapuram Colony in Kamuthi in Ramanathapuram District.

This reference to suppressing information to prevent attack speaks to the militancy of Pallars in this area. He went on to say that almost all the male members of Vellaiyapuram (200 houses) have police cases registered against them. He himself was a victim of caste violence and survived a murderous attack. In his words,

It's a pattern that the villagers of nearby Singam Puliyampatti would first garland the Thevar statue at their place and then walk through crossing Vellaiyapuram to enter Pasumpon. Though only the villagers were allowed to go in procession, people from other areas too join them and during the procession in 2012 they started raising slogans in praise of Thevar and denigrating the Dalits and started pelting stones at the Ambedkar and Immanuel statue. The Vellaiyapuram youth always have opposed raising slogans in their

area, so they retaliated by beating them up and chased them away. The Thevar youth, dropping the torches, ran away. This incident created a furore as the torch for Thevar was considered to be sacred and this was brewing vengeance in them and in order to seek revenge they were following me for a while. I didn't know that but one day when I was alone at a teashop before boarding a bus to go to Ramnad, a gang of men came forward and started hacking me with sickles. I suffered cut injuries on my head, hand and shoulders but survived as they left me in a pool of blood thinking I was dead. The unwritten law in Kamuthi is that during a conflict if they (Thevars) get caught near Ambedkar Sandhai they will be dead and if we get caught near Thevar Bus stand we will be dead.'

The attempt to murder Rajkumar resulted in a curfew; bus windscreens were damaged by angry mobs in Kamuthi and Abiramam, demanding the immediate arrest of all the accused in the case. Many shops, business establishments and schools were closed for the day in Mudukulathur and Kamuthi (*The Hindu*, 19 November 2010). Violence between Thevars and Pallars has also become common during other commemoration events and conferences. For example, a 1998 report says how when the *Thevar Kula Kootamaippu* organised a conference in Ramanathapuram ahead of that year's Thevar Jayanthi, it resulted in major caste violence. Members on their way to the conference in a vehicle procession raised slogans against the Dalits while crossing their villages. In retaliation, a few vehicles were stoned and the subsequent rumours fuelled further violence, resulting in the loss of ten lives and the destruction of property worth lakhs of rupees (*India Today*, 21 October 1998).

During my fieldwork in Tirunelveli in 2015 while attending the Pulithevar's 300th birth anniversary event, there was a commotion while I was waiting to board the bus from Sankarankoil bus stand to Nerkattumseval. All the buses stopped as news spread that the Pallars had attacked a convoy of vehicles on their way to Pulithevar's memorial led by Ganesha Thevar of All India Thevar Peravai near Sankarankoil following the allegation that the Thevars were raising slogans against the community. A lot of vehicles were attacked in this stone-throwing incident. Police protection prevented further escalation, but members of PT and other Pallar blocked the roads, bringing the traffic to a standstill.



Figure 53. A violent clash broke out in Sankarankoil between members of the Thevar community travelling in a convoy to Pulithevar Memorial and the Pallars in the locality. Photo: Ilaiyaraja ©



Figure 54. Murals carrying images of Muthuramalinga Thevar placed on the village square marking the space.

The above incidents of violence are bound up with space and hyper-masculinity. The physical incursion of spatially marked boundaries is accompanied by taunts and slogans seeking to exert dominance.) Caste honour is tied to power and status, and the historical

‘denial of masculine identity to Dalit men in the non-household domain’, and Dalit political assertion has created a new masculine identity based upon contesting caste norms, contributing to the ‘unmaking of upper caste masculinity in the public domain’ (Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan, 2002: 4399, 4404). In the conflicts described here we can witness both the newfound Dalit refusal to accept insults, and the Thevar attempts to reassert their superiority. The upshot is an increase in violence.

How violence is culturally represented is key to understanding how social groups use it as a potential tool or resource for identity formation (Schröder and Schmidt, 2001). In the case of the Thevars, the state violence inflicted upon them during the 1957 Mudukulathur Riots, when police opened fire killing five Thevar men, is remembered through the commemoration of what they call as *Aivar Dhinam* (Day of the Five). In 2015, the Police restricted the commemoration, allowing only locals to attend. Likewise, the Pallars have started to observe the killing of five Pallar men by Thevars during a Temple festival clash in Unjanai in 1979. However, the efforts of the Unjanai Pallars to build a memorial for their five were repeatedly thwarted by the government authorities, to avoid an annual commemoration in the caste sensitive region gaining popularity.



Figure 55. The stone pillars carrying the names of each victim were erected near the lake in Keezhathooval, the location where five Thevar men were allegedly shot dead in a police encounter in 1957.

On 23rd June 2015, I visited Unjanai village to attend a meeting among the villagers to discuss the construction of the memorial. The desire to assert themselves and create a sense of caste pride was palpable, though differences of opinion emerged, some wanting

to follow the legal procedures and others wanting to go ahead without doing so. The patron of the village Subramaniam was leading the discussion.

Subramaniam finally said, 'we should have built the memorial in 1979 itself. We failed to do so and now we are unable to, but we have to apply pressure and the government will allow us to construct if we are able to showcase strength of support.' (Field Notes, Unjanai, June 2015)

An act of violence has the potential to 'backfire against its perpetrators and make it contestable on a discursive level, not as a physical but as a performative act.' The 'experience of violence can be framed quite differently by the victims and perpetrators.' It provides the possible opportunity for victims 'to subvert the dominant group's intention to intimidate them through the use of violence by attaching a cultural meaning of their own to the suffering, a meaning that allows them to reclaim agency and political identity' (Schröder and Schmidt 2001: 6).

P.V. Kathiravan, the Usilampatti MLA offered a detailed analysis of how the conflict between Thevars and Dalits during the GPs started to emerge:

From 1963 onwards, we (Forward Bloc) were conducting the Thevar Jayanthi event and there were no issues, but when the Thevar Peravai (1976) came into existence, wherever the Thevar Peravai went and tried to establish its presence in the public space there was a counter effort. For example, wherever they went and erected a flagpole or signboard of Thevar Peravai, they (the Dalits) responded immediately with the erection of their Devendrar Peravai boards. This was not the case with FB; there were no such counter efforts against Forward Bloc. This kind of contention started taking place during the late 1970s itself ...

Last year (October 2013) ... the DGP told me that 'Kathiravan please tell your people in Madurai and Ramnad to remain calm as there have been sporadic incidents of violence.' I told the DGP that, 'During Thevar Jayanthi time you all conduct meetings, the top police officials participate in a meeting, then the District Collector organises another meeting, I don't know if you are organising those meetings out of fear that there will be violence or anticipating any untoward incident would occur, but one thing is clear, he [the Thevar community member] is also poor, they [the Scheduled Castes] are also poor, he is also not going to work because there are no jobs and it is the same with them. But both carry a strong antagonism towards each other and are roaming around as inveterate enemies. Do you have any scheme to create awareness among these communities? If we have proper rains and other industrial jobs there would be no problem at all, they all would be concentrating on their families and work. (Interview, Madurai, October 2014).

Kathiravan's observation about the lack of adequate employment and industrial growth in the southern region was shared by all the Committees set up to study the caste clashes of the 1990s. His recommendations were in vain: caste antagonism has taken a new shape through these GPs. Thevar GP has become an outlet for expressing Thevar pride and masculinity. For the old, the Thevar memorial is a temple, for the youth the whole event is about showcasing caste pride and power, in the face of declining social and economic standing. *Thangathattu Thagarathattu Thevara Ethirtha Thalaiya Vettu* (Golden Plate, Tin Plate, if you oppose Thevar we will behead you) *Deivathai Kandavarum Illai Thevarai Venravarum Illai* (None has seen the God and none has triumphed over Thevar) – these were some of the slogans shouted by young men, which are a common feature of Thevar GP. They serve no other purpose than orientating a sense of pride and aggression towards the Dalits. These performances during Thevar GP comprise what Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 29) term 'strategies of social closure,' where the definition of communities becomes 'us' and 'them' as clearly and diametrically opposed entities. Symbolic violence while defining groups in terms of their ideological affiliation creates a 'social imaginary' where the non-members become outsiders.



Figure 56. The name board of an auto stand functioning in the name of Immanuel, along with Ambedkar and Sundaralingam's images is wrapped under cloth for the Thevar Jayanthi celebrations.

The threat of violence is essential to the cultivation of an aggressive Thevar militancy. State recognition of Thevar GP serves to embolden caste members. The state's

connection with the cultural norms of the dominant caste mean privilege Thevar claims. Competitive associationalism has accelerated the symbolisation of historic heroes and spatial logic. It has also intensified caste antagonisms between the two communities, altering the social landscape of the southern districts. The history of the antagonism between the Thevars and Dalits is a continuing one in the southern districts and the GPs act as catalysts; over the years, the days preceding and following the GPs have become the time to settle scores, often with members of both communities being killed. The violence, in other words, is routinised. GP becomes an avenue to both habituate and perform violence in these ways, and it is thus an extension of the routine violence, both physical and symbolic.



Figure 57. A flagpole of the Devendra Kula Vellalar organisation carrying images of Immanuel in a Dalit neighbourhood under police protection during the Thevar Jayanthi.

Routinised Caste Violence

S.R. Tamilan (40), AIFB's Theni district secretary and the party's politburo member, was found dead in his room in a lodge in Bengaluru on December 26, 2014. His supporters suspected foul play and staged a demonstration in Theni, demanding an investigation. His body was brought to Theni and the party made arrangements for a public procession and funeral.

On reaching Allinagaram's Ambedkar Street there was a scuffle; members of the procession and people from the neighbourhood where members of Dalit castes reside, started to pelt stones at each other. They attacked each other with weapons and damaged shops and vehicles. Police *lathi*-charged and finally used teargas to bring the situation under control. Two policemen sustained injuries and some Thevars on a tractor were caught unawares: one fell under the wheels and was crushed. Neighbourhood people said that the people in the procession were drunk and started throwing stones at the Archana Clinic, owned by an Arunthathiyar doctor. They also threw the garland used for the deceased onto Pattalathamman temple, which infuriated the Dalits. Another man died when he fell off his two-wheeler while returning from the funeral. Police sources said the unruly behaviour of those taking part in the procession when they were passing through the Dalit colony had sparked the violence. All the male members in the Dalit colony left the colony, fearing arrests. Raghupathi, who hid in a nearby village, said,

They voluntarily drove the tractor into Ambedkar Street to attack the Pallars, but did not expect such retaliation from us. The police instead of controlling the procession started *lathi*-charging the Dalits and also filed cases against 116 members from our community. (Field Notes, Theni, December 2015)



Figure 58. Youth from Kunnoor near Theni district who were affected by the violence.

This violence highlights how competitive mobilisation has led to simmering tensions that can prompt caste violence. The routinised nature of caste antagonism affects Dalit children whose school is situated in a Thevar neighbourhood: it is a nightmare for the students, regularly receiving caste-based abuse and taunts. Thevars persistently use a route where Dalits are in the majority to showcase their power to invade Dalit space. Dalits assert themselves by retaliating. This contention over the control of public space, as explained by Tilly (2000), transforms the political significance of certain sites. Given the existing caste animosity, even the funeral procession over what was later identified to be a cardiac arrest provided them with an opportunity to showcase their anger. Conducting performances like *silambam* in this public space was an expression of their martiality and a warning not to cross swords with them. Towns in southern districts become sites of intense struggles between dominant caste assertions of control over space against lower caste self-expression. Any procession by the locally dominant Thevars provides the opportunity to exert their dominance. The notion of being seen as timid and meek defined the retaliatory action of the Dalits. The violent incidents here illustrate Van der Veer's (1996) arguments that riots facilitate the construction of social identities. The form of violence here is critical to our understanding of the social problem. The host of signifiers through which caste dominance, hierarchical order and martiality is exerted and communicated is crucial. Both the spatial and symbolic

structure of violence in caste conflicts are important. Das (1990: 12) says that certain patterns of violence become routinised if they follow expected paths in terms of their spatial and temporal location.

Everyday Caste Violence in Southern Districts

In recent years, southern Districts of Tamil Nadu have witnessed unprecedented levels of caste violence. Srivaikuntam, a temple town in Tuticorin district, has become a hotbed of communally motivated caste murders. The high volume of murders meant that I could not visit every relevant location. Therefore, I visited a selection of villages in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin. The whole of Srivaikuntam was replete with posters of AIFB's local leader, Suresh. Accompanied by local PT cadres, I first went to K.T. Kosalram Nagar, the Dalit neighbourhood where Bhaskar the deceased Srivaikuntam town secretary hailed from. It is a small neighbourhood with just fifty Pallar families, surrounded by Thevars:

The youth said that, 'Their [Thevar] idea is to make the SC families vacate the place so that they can occupy it and make the whole neighbourhood theirs.' Mariraj (39) said, 'Thevars have a strong political network functioning in Srivaikuntam. They occupy key posts in all the political parties in the block. They are engaged in agriculture, business, *kattapanchayat* (Kangaroo Courts) and usury.' Though it is a reserved constituency for the local body, the dominance stays with the Thevars, who appoint a puppet. Mariraj continued, 'Most of the common property resources like community halls, wells and tanks are located in the Thevar area. Conflicts arise over Thevars letting their cattle graze in the fields of Pallars, which destroys their crops.' (Field Notes, Srivaikuntam, June 2015)

In Kaalvai village, the upward mobility of the Pallars was the reason for the murder. The village has a predominant Thevar population but their family was among the most economically mobile in the village. Arumugharaja, one of the victims of Thevar antagonism was marked for his everyday behaviour, which included riding an Enfield Motorcycle and also engaging in large-scale farming. Troubles broke out over auction rights for banana cultivation, and destruction of crops. The system of *Kudikaaval* (community policing) was present, with the Thevars as traditional watchmen. One of my interlocutors at Kaalvai commented

that ‘keeping Thevars as watchmen is akin to *Karuvatta Varuthhu Poonaiyai Kaavalukku Vacha Kadhai than* (It is like, after frying dried fish you make the cat guard it)’ (Field Notes, Kaalvai, June 2015).

Thirumoolakkarai in Tirunelveli is a Pallar village with 350 households. Perumal and Saroja’s son Kumar was murdered over a dispute related to sexual harassment and molestation of women in public, a common source of inter-caste conflicts. Saroja said that a cordial relationship between the Thevars and Pallars had never existed and the Pallar youth are not submissive as in the ‘old days’.

The information that I gathered from the field site accords with a PT petition to the Governor of Tamil Nadu. The petition claimed that atrocities in southern districts were meticulously planned and executed against the Dalits, specifically Pallars. It also stated that the local police are in connivance with the dominant caste members and in all the cases they have accused fake persons who have no hand in murders. According to an *Indian Express* report on these murders, a junior police officer was found saying, ‘even the Chief Minister belongs to our caste and nobody can touch us’. A police officer who served in Tirunelveli has stated that even if the murders do not have a caste angle, caste plays a role in the investigations. ‘Most of these murders could have been prevented by early intervention. But complaints from Dalits are either ignored or the culprits are informed about there being a complaint, sometimes leading to the murder.’ PT Krishnasamy has stated that though caste conflicts are not new to the region, professional killers are now being hired (Janardhanan, 2015). After initially denying any caste angle to the murders, following sharp criticism from Dalit leaders Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan, the state government transferred the police top brass in the region (*The Hindu*, March 20 2015; Vijay Kumar, 2015).

The newly appointed Tuticorin SP stated that minor scuffles between bus passengers – particularly those between college students of the Thevar and Dalit communities – over playing caste songs on mobile phones had snowballed into caste clashes in the region. To curb such incidents, surveillance measures were intensified. Cameras were fitted in

all the buses and policemen joined commuting passengers as bus marshals. (*The Hindu*, 21 April 2015; 1 January 2017; Sivarajah 2015). Following pressure to curb violence, the police arrested AIFB party's Tamil Nadu Youth Wing Secretary, Suresh and recovered one revolver, six rounds of bullets and five swords from his home. Nine cases including three murder cases were registered against him. (*The Hindu*, 24 March 2015).

An allegation that frequently crops up in political circles during anti-Dalit violence is the predominance of Thevars in the police force. Following a petition that the police were biased, the National Council for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) demanded a reply from the Superintendent of Police, Tirunelveli district. In both their reply to the NCSC and a counter affidavit (W.P. (MD) No.21332 of 2014), the Tirunelveli police detailed the action taken in response to specific incidents of crime, and included details of the caste background of the investigating officers. Except in one case, all the other, investigating officers belonged to the Kallar and Agamudaiyar sects of the Thevar community (W.P. (MD) No.21332 of 2014). In the DIG's counter affidavit, the police quote retribution as the suspected motives for the murders (C.No.G4/216/73988). The tone of the report implicates Krishnasamy; it talks about his visit to Srivaikuntam to pay homage to the party functionary who was murdered and also his meeting in Tirunelveli to discuss the murders that were taking place. The administrative action, or inaction, indicates what Viswanath (2015:2) calls a process of 'dispersal' where the 'spectacular acts of anti-Dalit violence are just recorded as acts of lawlessness and justify state inaction and use the occasion for politically effective resource distribution'. Counter to Mosse's (2012) argument about 'the appearance of caste politics', the government has tried to avoid accepting these murders as acts motivated by caste, selecting other reasons, such as personal enmity, instead.

Habituated Caste Violence

The aural culture in the southern districts, which includes singing and playing songs in praise of a caste and its leaders at temple festivals or other social gatherings, has frequently resulted in clashes between the two caste groups of this study. Disputes in villages over traditional sports and games like *kabadi* have also been a common arena for fights along caste lines. Erecting flag poles and hoisting caste or caste-based party flags in certain locations and other common spaces have created sites of conflict. Instances of spatial discrimination have developed into serious disputes, such as over drawing and sharing water from common ponds and wells, access to common pathways, and the denial of rights to use graveyards. Many of these are widespread in India, but in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, the location for my fieldwork, economic mobility induced changes were at the root of most conflicts.

In the past, it was Thevars who were money-lending and -laundering in these regions, and due to their political and muscle power, they were also able to garner most of the Public Works Department, Municipal and Corporation contracts. However, the Dalits also started to enter these avenues. Dalits stopped approaching the Thevars for loans and Thevars could not accept this economic competition. Through the same usury practices, they were also at loggerheads with Dalits. For example, the illicit brewing of toddy and distillation of arrack was a flourishing business mostly done by the Thevars and other caste Hindus, but Dalits started doing the same. They became economically well off and resisted the sale of other castes' toddy and arrack in their colonies. This change, amplified by the proliferation of statues of caste leaders, caste name boards and caste flags, acts to fuel caste disputes.

Violence is not incidental but forms part of the everyday lives of these castes. Commemorations and other social events provide opportunities to assert and showcase dominance or denigrate members and leaders of other communities. They allow demonstrations of who has control over public space. In southern Tamil Nadu, the sensitive nature of caste relations is readily apparent; even minor cases of conflict can

result in murder. As a display of their dominance and martiality, Thevars indulge in what seem to be planned acts of murder, following a pattern of executing those who take legal recourse against them. By doing this they not only issue a warning to the Dalits but to members of all castes not to cross paths with them. Pallars have increasingly sought to fight back and attacks around Thevar GP in 2012 highlight their readiness to engage in counter-violence. There is, though, a sense in the community that Pallars are unable to retaliate in the same manner as in the 1990s. Indeed, in 2014, Dalit leader Krishnasamy called an emergency meeting of village heads of the Pallar community and party office bearers from the district to address caste violence, and bemoaned the absence of resistance among Pallar youth, despite the efforts of Thevars to make Pallars experience ‘untouchability in both traditional and modern forms.’ He pointed out that the meeting was to put an end to such imaginations to enslave the Dalits.

Stay united. The moment we remain divided we become victims of murders.
Keep your bodies fit, and healthy to counter-attack. We should protect ourselves
our villages and our school children. (Field Notes, Tirunelveli, November 2014)

Exclusive identities and the assertion of caste pride and masculinity, this suggests, are here to stay. Whilst Thevars have been primarily responsible for the spate of murders witnessed in southern districts of Tamil Nadu in recent years, caste antagonisms have been routinised through competitive caste associationalism and performances. Such events portray caste groups as homogeneous and coherent, but this of course masks a more complex reality. Krishnasamy points to the lack of unity not among the Pallars and among the Dalits as a whole in the southern districts; fissures were emerging. In the next chapter, I discuss those fissures and attempt to understand their larger implications.

CHAPTER NINE:

Reinventions and Fissures in Thevar and Dalit Identity Politics in Tamil Nadu

The hospitalisation of Chief Minister (CM) Jayalalithaa and her subsequent death in December 2016, was accompanied by intense political drama in Tamil Nadu. Her passing away not only left a political vacuum but also exacerbated fissures within the AIADMK, particularly among the Thevars as the most formidable lobbying group. The rise of the political power of Thevars in Dravidian politics has already been seen, but now this claim to power has led to the castes within the Thevar cluster crossing swords. Jayalalithaa's long-time aide and confidante, Sasikala was tipped to take over the reins. In the meantime, O. Panneer Selvam, who twice served as CM when Jayalalithaa was alive, was appointed as a stopgap CM in preparation for a smooth transition. However, Panneer Selvam, who had always been seen as a timid puppet, rebelled and refused to resign. He questioned why, during a crisis, he should pave the way for someone without political experience.

At first glance, the above is a political entanglement rather than a social one. Yet, a deeper analysis points towards fissures within the accumulated power structures built around the Thevars. In a cover story titled 'Thevar vs Thevar', Muralidharan (2017) exposed the infighting within the powerful lobby: 'Sasikala is a Kallar from Thanjavur, while Panneerselvam is a Maravar from the south.' Here, Muralidharan quoted Subagana Rajan, who felt that the Thevars from the south would resent the idea of a Thanjavur Kallar taking over as the party's general secretary. However in contemporary politics, Sasikala was seen as the source of Thevar power in politics; since her association with Jayalalithaa in the 1990s she had been serving behind the scenes as a power broker. She has had a hand in discussions with alliance partners, the allocation of Assembly seats and ministerial berths, and even administrative appointments. Considering her influence, political analyst Ramu Manivannan of Madras University has said that Sasikala and her extended family, referred to as the 'Mannargudi Mafia', has

‘penetrated almost every layer of government and the police over the years’ (*Hindustan Times*, 29 April 2017).

Both Sasikala and Panneer Selvam were seen to be representing Thevar power at different levels. The former’s influence was much talked about in the media and political circles, but the latter’s ascendancy to the CM’s post by chance had a positive impact on Thevars in the southern districts. As pointed out by Rajan, there remains an understated element of discomfort between the Thevars from the Cauvery delta region and the southern districts. This chapter will discuss these fissures within the Thevar collective and also among the Dalits.

Maintaining a collective identity is a laborious task for social movements and community organisations (Melucci, 1996). Collectives are riven by internal divisions and groups may fragment or splinter at any point. Driven by their strong sense of self-perception as martial castes, the three endogamous castes of Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars clubbed together as Mukkulathors, or more popularly, Thevars. The attempts to collectivise these castes are less than a century underway. The process was largely made possible by the community’s hero Muthuramalinga Thevar and was aided by the British efforts to criminalise these tribes under the CTA. As seen in the chapter 3 on the history of Thevar dominance, Muthuramalinga Thevar became the face of the Forward Bloc in Tamil Nadu. The party and the caste saw growth in mutual terms, since the party built itself largely on Muthuramalinga Thevar and his caste, who in turn identified themselves with the party. After the demise of Thevar, the FB was weakened but the efforts of his collectivisation remained firm and both culturally and politically the Thevars were solidified and emerged as the most important and dominant political force during the Dravidian rule, a standing they hold till today. However, there had been always an element of discomfort in terms of this collective identity, and fragmentations were anticipated. In the recent past, the Agamudaiyars, as I will showcase, have taken steps to move out of the cluster, bringing the fissures to the fore.

In the other major group considered in this study, caste-based assertion has led some Pallars to express their discontent at being identified as part of a Dalit collective. Since the 2000s the fractures in Dalit identity in Tamil Nadu have become more visible than ever and one can see this in the machinations of Dalit identity politics. There has been a calculated reinvention and construction of cultural symbols. Amongst these, most importantly, the term ‘Dalit’ itself is being remade, as it is no longer seen to represent the current generation of Pallars, who were once responsible for the formation of militant Dalit politics in the state. The 1990s saw the mass uprising of Dalit communities countering the dominance of intermediate castes. The emergence of a strong Dalit counter-mobilisation in the Pallar dominated southern districts of Tamil Nadu resulted in unprecedented levels of caste based violence and resistance. Having spearheaded the Dalit resurgence in Tamil Nadu, however, the Pallars now are caught in a double bind. Pallar groups have had a Janus-faced existence; in national circles they use the category of Dalit, whilst in local contexts they refrain. As the most advanced section among the SCs in Tamil Nadu, they have started to refuse to identify themselves with the generic category of Dalits. This has resulted in a situation where, as argued by Pandian (2014), the generic category of Dalit is now identified with Paraiyars rather than unifying the various oppressed castes. This search for a new identity amongst Pallars is marked by contestations. The ascription of a new identity is problematic for the politically active Pallars, who travel between the political usage of the term Dalit, and their preferred term Devendra Kula Vellalar. Added into this mix are the emerging strategies of many small groups among Pallars who are not involved in electoral politics. Influenced by Tamil nationalism and Hindutva forces, they claim a hoary past as descendants of royal lineage and as lords of irrigated lands. They use literary sources to claim that they were originally referred to as Mallars before being made Pallars and come up with strategically redefined slogans such as *Yerum Poarum Engal Kula Thozhil* (Ploughing the fields and fighting battles is our community occupation), thus reinventing their pasts.

Using interactions with my Thevar and Pallar interlocutors in the field, this chapter argues that the collective identities of Thevars and Pallars rest primarily in their

historical antagonism with each other and the strong contentious politics they engage in. The increasing fragmentations of Thevar and Pallar identities are part of the strategies deployed by political entrepreneurs (Wyatt, 2010) within each group. Through an array of performances, the Mukkulathors claim to be descended from the clans of Chera, Chola and Pandyas. In order to challenge their subjugation, the Pallars now replicate the practices of both Thevars and Nadars in disavowing their lowly pasts. Seen within the prism of Deliège's (1992) conceptualisation of 'replication and consensus' and Karanth's (2004) analysis of the same within the framework of 'hegemony and dissent', the Pallar imitation of the Thevars – most visible in terms of GPs - could be seen as a mode of resistance.

The implications of such performances for a common Dalit identity, however, cannot be overlooked. The chapter is divided into two parts. First, I discuss the fissures within the Thevar community and how they are expressed through various idioms. I look specifically at the Agamudaiyar resistance to the collective, who wish to carve an identity of their own. Next, section deals with the fractures in Dalit identity, with a focus on analysing how GPs have transitioned from a site of Dalit assertion into one where cracks are created and where the possible re-ascription of identities is imagined. In both the case of the Thevars and the Dalits, there is an attempt by a specific caste group, the Agamudaiyars and the Pallars respectively, to carve a separate caste identity.

Fractures over Representational Issues

In order to understand the contemporary collectivisation process among the Thevars, it is pertinent to return to how it began. It is important to recall that these three caste groups – the Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars – are endogamous castes spread over different geographical locations but thickly populated in the southern districts. During the early twentieth century, British efforts to collect statistical details on castes and to have a caste census spawned a large number of caste associations. These were engaged in a conscious attempt to claim a respectable status. In 1911, in Thanjavur, the Kallars formed the *Indirakulathibar Sangam* (Association of the Clan of Lord Indra) and also

started a journal called *Kallar Komaan* (Kallar King). In Ramnad, on 6th June 1929, Rajaram Pandian formed the *Maravar Mahajana Sangam* (Association of Maravars) and in the Madras Presidency on 17th January 1932, Sathaiah Servai formed the *Agamudaiyar Sangam* (Association of Agamudaiyars). Though these caste associations functioned independently for each respective caste, the existing political situation brought them together and in the following years, a desire to consolidate these castes developed. On 28th January 1934, Muthiah Thevar from Madras (now Chennai) called for a meeting at which the leaders formed the *All India Mukkulathor Sangam* (All India Association of Three Castes). Rajaram Pandian was chosen as the president of the association. The Sangam organised a conference in Madurai on 25th June 25 1940, at a time when the Thevars held many key positions in the Congress party. The conference was attended by a huge number of people (Muthuthevar, 1976: 308-09).

The meeting highlighted the push for unity within these castes in order to gain wider political benefits. This was also during the period that Muthuramalinga Thevar was active in politics and he moved from Congress to establish the Forward Bloc in the Tamil-speaking region of the Madras Presidency. He was engaged in the consolidation of the Mukkulathors through various causes in Madurai, including the protests against the CTA and other labour struggles. Up until his demise in 1963, Thevar represented the collective identity of the Thevars through his politics. Following his death there was no comparable figure. Therefore, in the 1970s and 1980s as a replication of the consolidation of the 1930s, the Thevar Peravai was established. Formed by selecting its office bearers from each sect, its first president Mayandi Thevar was from the Kallar caste, secretary V. Ramakrishnan belonged to the Agamudaiyar caste and its treasurer was Karuppasamy Thevar from the Maravar caste. Driven by a desire to unify, the Thevar Peravai developed Mukkulathor solidarity in the cultural and political spheres. Through the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Thevar Peravai invested heavily in symbolism (Tamil Nadu Thevar Peravai Legal Rules Handbook, undated). This reached its height in the 1990s with the transformation of events like the Thevar GP into sites of collectivisation. The whole event was orchestrated in order to demonstrate solidarity and strength (See Chapter 4).

Attempts were also made in the literary sphere, literature on Kallars, Maravars and Agamaudaiyars, which was originally published separately in different time periods, was published together as Mukkulathor or Thevar history. Three historical works – *Kallar Charithiram* (History of the Kallars) by Na. Mu. Venkatasamy Nattar, published in 1923, *Maravar Charithiram* (History of the Maravars) by V.S. Kulandai Velusamy and V.S. Asirvatha Thevar Udayar, published in 1938 and *Agamudaiyar Varalaru* (History of the Agamudaiyars) by A. Andiappa Thevar, published in 2000 – were compiled to produce *Mukkulathor Charithiram*. The publisher, Kavya Shanmughasundaram stated in his preface that it was an attempt to symbolise the unity of the three castes. Literary evidence suggests that the term Mukkulathor is a social construct originating from the early twentieth century. There is no reference to the term in the Sangam corpus or other ancient Tamil literature. However, there is an anonymous reference that, *Kallar Maravar Kanaththor Agambadiyar Mella Mella Maari Vellalar Aanarey* (Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars slowly changed to become Vellalas) indicate the process where the Kallars and Maravars known for their martial prowess and as hunters slowly evolve to become Agamudaiyar and then reach the significant civilising stage of Vellalar (who engage in agriculture) (Headley 2011: 105) Another literary effort to unite the castes came with the publication of Muthu Thevar's book, *Moovendhar Kula Thevar Samooga Varalaru* (History of the Three Clans of the Thevar Community) in 1976. This activity in the literary sphere was supplemented by contributions in the popular domain (films and songs such as those detailed in Chapter 4). Collectively, they popularised and gave substance to the social construct that bound together the three endogamous castes as ancient clans that had ruled Tamil country in the distant past. There were counter efforts. For example, 1977 saw the publication of a history, *Moovendar Yaar* (Who Are/Were the Three Great Kings?), which directly contested Muthu Thevar's work. It was written by Deva Asirvatham, a retired government official belonging to the Roman Catholic Pallar community, but gained little traction at the time. It did enjoy resurgence in the late 2000s, but that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Despite tremendous cultural efforts towards Thevar solidarity, certain divisions persisted. Those fissures are now more visible than ever before. The most indignant are the Agamudaiyars who feel that they have been marginalised within the Mukkulathor cluster. As early as the late 1980s the Agamudaiyars were indignant about the lack of recognition of Marudhu Pandiars. This made the members of the Thevar Peravai organise a separate event in their honour and thus the Marudhu Pandiar GP came into existence (Personal Communication with Agamudaiyar leader Nagaimugan, June 2015). The anxieties of the Thevar leaders concerning the united identity of Mukkulathor or Thevar, especially with regard to the Agamudaiyar question, have always been serious ones. This came true as the Agamudaiyars displayed their dissent under the banner of *Tamil Nadu Agamudaiyar Sangam* (Association of the Agamudaiyars of Tamil Nadu) by organising their first state-level conference in June 2015. This emphasised their discomfort with collectively identifying as Mukkulathors and expressed their desire to be identified as Agamudaiyars only. As part of my fieldwork I met the man believed to be behind this assertion and attended the conference held at Thanjavur. For the first time, a major event had been organised by one of the constituent castes of the Mukkulathors in which the image of Muthuramalinga Thevar was palpably missing. As per usual, the caste rhetoric was based on amplified number games; ‘we are one crore Agamudaiyars in the state, we do not have unity but we have different groups and many leaders. Our Agamudaiyar history needs to be rewritten in a correct form,’ thundered the speaker who introduced the conference. Prior to the conference I met the organisers at the lodge where they were staying.

As I sat with T. Arappa, a veteran activist and the brain behind the conference, he said that among the Thevar cluster in the southern districts there was consciousness about the Agamudaiyars. ‘For example, meetings and conferences happened only in the south in places like Madurai or Ramanathapuram. However, the community carrying the title Agamudaiyars is widely spread across the state and this consciousness to know the community’s history or to assert [it] was missing among the current generation of youth.’ He stated that the conference was to take it to the next generation ... ‘The conference’s main purpose is to connect the Agamudaiyars of the northern and southern districts.’ On the absence of Thevar’s image(see Figure 59) in the conference stage, flyers and

invitation, he said that ‘this is purely Agamudaiyar consolidation so we avoided Thevar’s image.’ (Field Notes, Thanjavur, 21, June 2015)

Arappa’s statement indicates the identity crisis that the Agamudaiyars are facing at the moment, which was induced by their perception of being lost in a collective identity and finding it necessary to address this. The desire to bridge a geographical gap and carve a new identity for themselves is evident in his account. I later interviewed Arappa to glean an overview of their efforts and the possible implications.

K: On the one hand, Thevar GP as an event consolidates the castes with the clustered identity of Mukkulathors in which Agamudaiyars are a core component. Wouldn’t this consolidation as a parallel event create fissures?

A: Fissures will be there. It cannot be avoided. For me individually my career is based on the Mukkulathor identity and I [have been] active for the last 30 years based on that. I have been part of Thevar Jayanthi, then attended by a mere 200 people, and I was a core member of the group, which planned, and worked towards making it a politically big event [that] is now attended by a few lakh people. The politics based on that got translated into establishing the Mukkulathor collective, but when it came to electoral politics, instead of concentrating on the underlying representative aspects, the collective brought in a situation where the electoral constituencies were cornered by Kallars and Maravars, leaving Agamudaiyars out. This has resulted in undermining representation. For example, giving seats to Kallars or Maravars in a constituency where the electorate is dominated by Agamudaiyars. The other important aspect is that the other two castes are part of [the] Most Backward Class (MBC) category, while Agamudaiyars are listed in the BC (Backward Class) category so there is resentment within the community to be listed under MBC to accrue governmental benefits. (Interview Thanjavur 21 June 2015).

Central to Agamudaiyar resentment, in other words, are the questions of representation and equity. The resurgence of a politics of identity in the Tamil context was noted by De Neve and Carswell (2011) by reference to Gounders in Western Tamil Nadu. Significantly, status concerns are not to the fore here, and the emphasis is placed on inadequate division of political and economic resources.



Figure 59: The official invitation poster put up by the Tamil Nadu Agamudaiyar Sangam Head Office for the Agamudaiyar Resurgence Conference held at Thanjavur in June 2015.

The above interview and the fact that the Agamudaiyar consolidation conference began with the slogan *Ini Saamaram Veesum Sankatangal Vendam, Agamudaiyar Illaiyel Ariyanaigal Illai* (Let there be no feelings of discomfort of being enslaved, there will be no thrones without Agamudaiyars) indicates the indignation of a community which feels itself marginalised within a collective primarily founded to garner political and economic benefits. The coming together of these castes as a Mukkulathor collective does symbolise their power to assimilate and exert their dominance but internally it has created a lot of ruptures. The Agamudaiyars, as the slogan encapsulates, believe that they have been exploited by the two other castes and reduced to mere onlookers. Aside from the conviction that they are being left out of the governmental benefits, there is also a growing resentment that their own individuality as a caste is being lost. At the conference the leaders who spoke espoused their feelings of being alienated and discriminated.

T. Arappa read the resolutions: ‘An estimated one crore Agamudaiyars are there in the state and they all should leave their titles such as Thevar and consolidate

themselves as Agamudaiyars and be listed in the MBC category. There has been inadequate representation of the Agamudaiyars in key government posts and this has to be resolved immediately and adequate representation under the concept of social justice should be upheld.’ (Field Notes, Thanjavur, June 2015)

The resolutions here clearly indicate the community’s belief that they have been deprived of the legitimate benefits afforded to the rest of the collective. Therefore, they are mobilising to address both distribution and recognition within the universe of social justice, bringing into focus the crisis of identity politics and its significance. As put forth by Fraser (1998: 2), in order to address injustice it is necessary to employ both the politics of recognition and redistribution together. Throughout the conference the speakers espoused the need for a separate, adequately recognised identity. In his speech, Sreepathy G. Senthilkumar, the founding president of the association said,

Getting caught under that Mukkulathor blanket, Agamudaiyars never got any benefits. Neither (the Kallars and Maravars) allowed us to get any benefits and we have to immediately get out of that and only then we can live with our own identity as Agamudaiyars. (Field Notes, Thanjavur, June 2015)

Senthil Kumar encapsulates the sense that Agamudaiyar interests are being lost within the collective. Their intention to identify themselves based on their titles rather than castes and to address how, even with substantial numbers, they are being denied justice in electoral politics that are largely based on majoritarianism were the key issues for consideration. The solution, they feel, lies in the creation of a singular identity based on their caste as Agamudaiyars. Raja, a journalist working for an English daily paper in Thanjavur, accompanied me to meet the office bearers. He relayed that the Agamudaiyars maintain that they have lived under the hegemony of Thanjavur Kallars and the fissures within the Mukkulathor cluster have always been there. He described how the Agamudaiyars at different times in the past tried to consolidate under their own caste banner. Nagaimugan, a senior Agamudiyar leader also expressed the dilemma of the Agamudaiyars:

The challenge that the Agamudaiyars are facing now is identity crisis; they are referred [to] as Mukkulathor in the south and Mudaliar in the north but not as Agamudaiyar. There was no proper networking force within the community, which could have brought them together long back. There was a time when Muthuramalinga Thevar was there [and] we were part of FB, but after his demise we were sidelined and then we had to come out. Our aim is to get

adequate political representation and this conference is a step towards that.
(Interview, Thanjavur, June 2015)

Agamudaiyar dissent is another example of the politics of accommodation in the Tamil context, where there is a history of the representation of backward castes and other social groups. Made famous in Tamil Nadu through the Vanniyar demands for Most Backward Status (Radhakrishnan, 1996), the politics of quota-based representation defined Tamil politics in the 1980s. Due to their victimisation as Criminal Tribes, the Kallars and sections of Maravars were classified under the denotified tribes list and later under the MBC list. The Agamudaiyars as part of the same cluster are also now demanding such a classification. The resolutions passed, the symbolic language used, the introduction of new flag, the conspicuous absence of Muthuramalinga Thevar's image (See figure 59) and the presence of community leaders from other castes like the Vellalars and Mudaliars denoted the governing concept behind the event: the carving out of an independent identity for Agamudaiyars of the southern and northern districts with an increased lobbying capacity and access to governmental benefits and other resources. This manner of caste-cluster reordering has a long history stretching back to the colonial government and the first caste census (Dirks, 2001).

Even in Arappa's account, however, there exists a dilemma. He wishes to see the Agamudaiyars represented as a separate category but his leaning towards the Thevar collective is still evident. Remaining within the collective and demanding more representation does not seem to be an option, however, and Arappa feels that the consolidation of the Agamudaiyars on their own is inevitable. Having spent two days in Thanjavur for the first state-level Agamudaiyar conference, I returned to Madurai and met V.S. Navamani to discuss the emerging divisions within the Thevar collective. As I explained the conference, he nodded his head and acknowledged that he had been following events. He immediately pointed out that when Muthuramalinga Thevar was alive, 'there [were] no caste differences within the cluster. Agamudaiyars like A.R. Perumal [and] V.A. Sivan were among the disciples of Muthuramalinga Thevar and he had even gifted a portion of his assets to them. Both during Thevar's time and after, in

the order of preference after leaders like Sasivarna Thevar and Mookaiah Thevar it was A.R. Perumal who was on the list.’ The interview continued:

VSN: It has to be understood that these fissures are political in nature and [were] there even during Thevar’s time, members of the different sects of Kallar Maravar and Agamudaiyars were never completely with Thevar and it was not possible, owing [to] their own loyalties as part of Congress. Even members of these three castes stood against Thevar. And Thevar should be seen here not just as a leader of the Mukkulathors but [as] an important political leader of the state. Even during his first election against the Raja of Ramnad, the Ramnad Agamudaiyars wholly supported Raja. The Kamudhi Servai (Agamudaiyars) also supported the Raja and on the other hand, in places like Narikudi, the Agamudaiyars were [very] much loyal towards Thevar, even more than the Maravars of the Ramnad region.

K: The Agamudaiyars repeatedly claim that the Kallars and Maravars are getting a lion’s share in the cluster, leaving nothing to them, especially in regard to reservation benefits.

VSN: To state that the Kallars and Maravars were reaping the benefits of a consolidated identity is false. If you look at the history, it was these two castes that were wholly affected by the CTA. How could the Agamudaiyars, who have not faced such criminalisation, be expecting to gain such reservations? Politically being sidelined is something that the Agamudaiyars have been grappling with for long, even at the height of consolidation talks, when Jayalalitha’s first government came with an GO to announce the Mukkulathors as a unified caste category under the *Thevar Inam* (Thevar Community) the Agamudaiyars of both Sivaganga and Thanjavur resisted it, stating that ‘we belong to a different category. (Interview, Madurai, 23 June, 2015).



Figure 60. Posters put up in Madurai by the Agamudaiyar organisation, questioning their marginalisation within the Mukkulathor Collective. Photo: K.Manikandan.

Later, Navamani also attributed the fissures to a ploy by the Dravidian parties to keep the Thevars under their control. For example, the Agamudaiyars wish to make the

former film actor S.S. Rajendran the modern icon of the community, but he was essentially an icon of the Dravidian movement and never expressed or identified himself as an Agamudaiyar representative. The DMK had consistently dodged any calls by the Thevars for a consolidated identity. For example, as early as 1972 Mookaiah Thevar requested that, on a visit to Madurai, Karunanidhi officially announce in a government order that the three castes of Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar (referred to as Mukkulathors) were Thevars. Karunanidhi sarcastically remarked that it was a good suggestion but ‘our friend Anbil Dharmalingam’ to his right supported it and Mannai Narayanasamy on his left opposed it. He thus alluded to resistance to collective categorisation within the community. Likewise, during the unveiling of the Marudhu Pandiar statue in 2007, Karunanidhi as CM responded to the same plea for government approval of a consolidated Thevar identity by saying, ‘come united as Mukkulathor we would announce you as Thevar’ (Shanmughasundaram, 2007: 3). In a highly critical tone, Navamani explained to me that it was after the demise of Mookaiah Thevar that things got worse and the establishment of Thevar Peravai and its activities created cracks within the community and led to antagonism among the Thevars and Dalits.

Despite being seen as the most politically powerful community and enjoying patronage from the major Dravidian parties, the Thevar leaders and sympathisers complain that the Dravidian parties lack any will to help consolidate these castes. It is also evident that many believe the political parties manage the caste situation in order to maintain the electoral benefits, creating fissures and treating the groups as vote banks. The posters above (figure 60) indicate disgruntlement *within* the collective where the Agamudaiyars have gone public demanding their share in political representation and power, one of the posters reads, ‘for votes you bring the collective but for positions it’s the two castes in the collective it takes them all’. My interlocutors, however, state that if the Dravidian parties did not foster such divisions and engage in partisan politics, such divisions would not be so prominent and the Thevars would be even more powerful.

It is important here to step back from the claims of Thevar respondents and consider the community’s political standing. In terms of electoral representation the Thevars as a

cluster form just eight per cent of the population (Wyatt, 2010), but in the state as a whole, they actually wield more power than numerically larger caste groups because of geographical concentration and traditional forms of feudal power (see Chapter 3). In an important critique, social historian V. Geetha (2017), who otherwise has had a sympathetic account of the non-Brahmin movement, sums it up,

Dalit critiques have emerged in the context of a model of economic development and electoral politics that has helped consolidate the political authority of “touchable” castes across the state—including many of those categorised under the Backward Classes. There has been a hardening of caste identities, since these have proven useful in staking claims to reservations and state resources. On top of that, both major Dravidian parties have deliberately cultivated voters from the “touchable” castes. Here the AIADMK was an early starter. Under MGR, it pursued castes collectively known as the Mukkulathors, ensuring their presence in local administrations and police forces.

The Thevars are the lynchpin of contemporary Dravidian politics. For example, out of AIADMK’s 50 district secretaries, Thevars form about 26 per cent (Muralidharan, 2017). During the recent crisis in the party it was pointed out that the Gounder communities had 28 MLAs, but only 5 made it to the Cabinet. In contrast, out of the 20 MLAs from the Thevar community 9 became ministers, including the Chief Minister (Kumar and Kolappan, 2017). This gives us an idea of the concentration of power among the Thevars. John Harris (2002) recalls M.S.S. Pandian consistently arguing that for all its twists and turns and political opportunism the Dravidian Movement was successful in infusing ‘the much needed sense of self-respect among the Non-Brahmans’ (Pandian, 1994: 221). Harris points out that the development of particular relationships with certain caste groups, like that between the Thevars and the AIADMK in the south, have created serious tensions. The major criticism of the Dravidian parties is that their politics have unified the intermediate castes and vested them with immense political power, which they will not allow to trickle down to the castes below them. Despite these existing realities, one can hear the Thevars complain about the role of Dravidian politics as being inimical to their interests. In the following sections I will discuss fragmentation by referring to the example of the Pallars. Different groups and organisations among them are working towards carving a separate caste identity more on a par with the Thevars, affecting Dalit unity.

Dalit Unity is Undermined and Fissures Gain Prominence

During the 1997 Ramabai Colony massacre in Mumbai, where 10 Dalits were shot dead and several others injured, *Outlook India* magazine carried a cover story on Dalit politics and Ambedkar's fractured legacy. In its section on South Indian Dalit politics, it mentioned how the leaders of three major Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu – the Paraiyars, Arunthathiyars and Pallars – while agreeing on the need to abandon the icon of Periyar and choose Ambedkar as the new totem, were unwilling to come under one umbrella. The leaders accused each other of being sectarian and the article concluded quoting sociologist Nandu Ram, stating that the Dalits seem to have too many 'leaders' and too little unity (*Outlook India*, 30 June, 1997).

'Dalit' is a word for a community and an identity that are in the making. The term Dalit means 'ground down', 'broken to pieces' or 'crushed'. However, this word is marked by fluidity; it has become an argumentative identity, using dissent to form a certain type of political subject in a hierarchical social order (Rao, 2009). The very term, as argued by Rao, carries a host of narratives. These talk about how a new political collectivity was constituted by resignifying the Dalit's negative identity within the caste structure as a positive political value. The Dalit politics of recognition and equality comprised an original critique of the Hindu caste order and was accompanied by the creation of a radical political counterculture. Due to certain universalities like the subjective experience of caste discrimination and untouchability, Dalit histories and identities are homogenised in nature. My argument here is that despite those universals, there exist strong distinctions and it is important to unpack the essentialisation of Tamil Dalit identities and histories. A unified Tamil Dalit identity is a social construct that is subject to vulnerability. The effort is not to undermine the validity of Tamil Dalit discourses, but to underpin the shortcomings inherent in fusing together castes categorised as 'scheduled'. Each caste is distinct in terms of history, culture and everyday practices and they are stratified hierarchically.

In the south Indian context, the category of Adi Dravidars (Original Dravidians), coined

by the *Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha* in 1892, refers to all the Depressed Classes (DCs) in the state. In the 1920s, discontent grew regarding the term *Adi Dravidar*. In the same period, the Pallars and Arunthathiyars dissociated themselves from the Paraiyars and formed their own caste associations, marking the first division of the drive to build a collective identity. The Pallars started forming their independent organisations, the first known such effort to consolidate on their own was a conference held at Sriram Grounds in Tiruchi on 21st and 22nd May 1922. The conference was entitled *Tiruchi Zilla Uzhavar Kuzhu Maanadu* (Conference of Tiruchi Zilla Farming Groups). During the colonial period, close to ten organisations were established by the Pallars at various places like Salem, Tiruchi and Thanjavur (Raghupathi, 2014: 145). The Pallars living in Ramnad district under the leadership of Perumal Peter established the *Poovaisya Indra Kula Vellalar Sangam* in August 1922. In the same district, the Pallars organised a conference on 23rd April 1924 at Settidiyanpatti in Ramnad under the leadership of Subramania Moopanar, a member of the Taluk Board in Tiruchi, and Palaniyandi, a Havildar. In this conference, the Pallars decided to call themselves *Devendra Kula Vellalars* and formed the *Devendra Mahajana Kula Sabha*. Despite such processes of consolidation, the appellation *Adi Dravidars* or *Adi Dravida* continued to remain a blanket term for all the DCs until the colonial government substituted it with Scheduled Castes in the year 1935. Still, the Tamil Nadu government uses the term *Adi Dravida* to address the Scheduled Castes in the state, a usage which is highly contested (Karthikeyan, 2011b; Mohan, 1993:45).

During this time, each caste sought to establish its unique identity by reconstructing its past as glorious and establishing its superiority. DCs argued that their dominant position in the society had been systematically destroyed over the years and they were now relegated to a position as outcasts. As a consequence, the coming together of caste organisations, which began in the 1920s in the name of the *Adi Dravidar* movement, was a convergence of different untouchable castes who sought to maintain their uniqueness. Over the years, fractures formed in the unified caste identity of the 1920s. Thus, the political and social movements of the Paraiyars, Pallars, and the Arunthathiyars form a separate and distinct history. This does not imply that they were not functioning together in different realms under a common denominator like

Depressed Classes or Scheduled Castes.

The Dalit Panthers and the United Dalit Struggles

Despite being active from the 1890s until the 1950s, Dalit politics⁶⁵ in the Tamil speaking regions of Madras Presidency was subsumed into the ethno-nationalist cause of Tamil Nationalism and Dravidian politics. The unified caste identity that was prevalent in the colonial times, when quite a few organisations were found to be working for equality and the liberation of the DCs, gradually became dormant in the years afterwards. The intermediate period from the 1950s to the late 1980s was marked by the Dravidian hegemony and not much scholarship is available on this period. Though there were notable leaders like Ilayaperumal of Congress and Vai. Balasundaram of *Ambedkar Makkal Iyakkam* and figures like Immanuel Sekaran, (see Chapter 4), there were no strongly autonomous and visible Dalit mass movements. However, during the 1980s, influenced largely by the militant Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra, strong rebellious counter figures emerged in the southern districts among the Pallars (Gorringe, 2005; Collins, 2017). A. Malaichamy, an advocate based in Madurai became the convener of the Dalit Panthers of India(DPI) (Tamil Nadu), and John Pandian and Pasupathi Pandian unleashed terror on the dominant castes with their counter-violence methods. There was a sense of unity among the Pallars and Paraiyars and even Arunthathiyars to some extent. The struggles led by Malaichamy against caste discrimination and untouchability in Madurai and the neighbouring districts drew huge crowds and there were no disparities among the castes. ‘Malaichamy advocated Dalitness and unity among Dalits.’ (Personal Communication with Joseph Xavier, who worked closely with Malaichamy. Madurai, October 2014). The term Dalit gained prominence in Tamil Nadu during this time and in the early 1990s, under the leadership of fiery orator Thirumavalavan, the Dalit Panthers and their confrontational street politics grew into a major Dalit party. Oorkavalan is one of the earliest members of the DPI and a notable figure of Dalit politics in the Madurai region of the late 1970s and

⁶⁵ The history of Dalit movements and politics in Tamil Nadu is chequered and long. It actually precedes the Dravidian movement or to be precise, the non-Brahmin movement’s roots start in Dalit struggles (see Rajadurai and Geetha, 1998), Stalin Rajangam the prolific Dalit writer has written a lot of books tracing various histories of the Dalit pasts.

1980s. A retired engineer, he is still actively involved in Dalit politics. I met him in Chennai to discuss Dalit politics and the trajectory of Pallar mobilisation.

Oorkavalan said that during Malaichamy's time there was no room for caste-based fissures or differences as it was a movement that purely worked for the uplift of all the oppressed castes. 'The leaders and office bearers were actually working towards the liberation of the oppressed from the clutches of caste based discrimination. Today, I see at certain places the differences among oppressed castes have become so sharp and it is true that it has resulted in large-scale fissures.' He argued that till Malaichamy's death and even immediately after that, too there were no such differences in DPI till [they] became the Liberation Panthers. Thirumavalavan's leadership received widespread acceptance among the Paraiyars and came to be perceived as their party. This resulted in not only fissures but made the Pallars and Arunthathiyars look for collective mobilisation within their own caste groups. And as a first step, important Pallar leaders like Krishnasamy, Pasupathi Pandian, Chandrabose, and Sattur Amirtharasu, gathered in Madurai and spoke about floating a common organisation⁶⁶, however it did not materialise. (Field Notes, Chennai, July 2015)



Figure 61. A 1992 flyer for a protest meeting led by John Pandian, representing All India Devendra Kula Vellalar Sangam, and Thirumavalavan, representing the DPI, held at Aruppukottai against the murder of Dalits in Kannicheri, Ramnad and Chennagarampatti in Madurai district.

⁶⁶ However, Krishnasamy, who had floated an independent caste based organisation by mobilising the Pallars in the south with the Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation, in 1995 entered institutional politics and became an Independent MLA in the 1996 election fighting along with Janata Party alliance and in 1998 transformed the organisation into a full fledged political party in 1998 and named it Puthiya Tamilagam. See Wyatt, 2009.

The image above (figure 61) demonstrates how the Pallars and Paraiyars used their own organisations to unify and fight caste discrimination from within the Dalit collective identity. A notice printed during the 1989 Bodi riots demanding the release of John Pandian describes the consolidated efforts of the SC/ST organisations who relayed the demand to the state government. Led by L. Elayaperumal of SCALM, a host of leaders belonging to the Pallar, Paraiyar and Arunthathiyar castes gathered in Madurai on 19th September 1989. They decided to organise a rally in Madras (now Chennai) on 27th September to ask the Karunanidhi government to end the atrocities being committed against the Dalits. The 1980s and 1990s was a period marked by largescale violence against Dalits and in response there developed visible forms of Dalit mobilisation. These challenged caste hegemony and advanced the need for autonomous popular Dalit political movements to contest Dravidian politics (see Gorringer, 2005 and 2017; Wyatt, 2001). The transformation of the DPI to VCK in the 1990s made Pallar leaders start their own political outfits, though John Pandian, Pasupathi Pandian and Krishnasamy were having outfits bearing their caste name it was in 1998 that Krishnasamy founded the first political outfit majorly representing the Pallars called Puthiya Tamilagam, an organisation comparable to VCK. The VCK cadres refuted the accounts of Oorkavalan and Joseph Xavier and stated that after Malaichamy's death the Pallars, unable to accept the leadership of Thirumavalavan who was a Paraiyar, moved away from DPI. In the coming sections I will discuss how the fissures of the 1990s deepened in the 2000s.

Fissures among Tamil Dalits

Corresponding to the cross-caste social category *Adi Dravida*, which was prevalent in the 1920s, the category Dalit in the contemporary Tamil situation reflects a plurality of castes and includes the Paraiyars the Pallars and the Arunthathiyars among others. Though they are generally clubbed together as Dalits, the social category rarely translates into a common identity. Each caste has a distinct identity and a proclivity toward divergence is pervasive among them. The differences within Tamil Dalit communities were amplified after the 1990s as Dalit movements, which had gained momentum, grew into fully fledged mass political movements; each caste developed a

political party for its representation in electoral politics. The Dalit Panthers of India became *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (the Liberation Panthers) led by Thol. Thirumavalavan, and due to its leader and strong base in the northern districts, was identified as a Paraiyar party. *Puthiya Tamilagam* (New Tamil Nadu) led by Dr. K. Krishnasamy, meanwhile, was seen as a Pallar party. R. Athiyamaan spearheaded a liberation movement called *Adhi Thamizhar Peravai*, which sought separate reservation for Arunthathiyars.

The pan-Indian Dalit identity that took root in Tamil Nadu in the 1980s was accepted by most of the SCs, and formed a part of everyday politics (though not self-definition) until the early 2000s. However, a section of Pallars staunchly refuse to identify themselves as Dalits. They argue that ‘Dalit’ is a Marathi word meaning oppressed or ground into the soil. This, they point out, connotes inferiority instead of assertion and pride. Pallar scholars influenced by Tamil nationalist politics and Hindutva claim that the term ‘Dalit’ in Tamil Nadu refers to Paraiyars, and Dalit ideology has been accepted and disseminated mostly by them. Rejecting the pan-Indian identity, ‘Dalit’ scholars like Gnanasekaran and Gurusamy Sidhar prefer identifying themselves as Devendra Kula Vellalars (DKVs) or Mallars. Similar to *Dalithiyam* (Dalit Literature), which is the literary movement of Tamil Dalits, DKVs have launched a movement called *Mallariyam* (discussed below), which works toward the uplift of the DKVs. They emphasise that their literature should be identified as *Mallariya illakiyam* (Mallar Literature) and not as Dalit literature. In a series of articles written in the journal *Mallar Malar*, Gnanasekaran contends that the DKVs have a distinct literary lineage that predates Dalit literature. He argues that *Uzhuthi Pattu*, *Ermangalam*, and *Pallu illakiyam* (literature by and on Pallars) dates back to the seventeenth century and it is irrelevant to call their writings Dalit literature (Gnanasekaran, 1998).

Following this, the term Mallar was used in the literary circles as an attempt to reclaim their golden past. The previously mentioned R. Deva Asirvatham, a Roman-Catholic Pallar who worked as a Deputy Collector in the 1970s, founded this initiative. His major works— *Moovendhar Yaar* (Who Are/Were the Three Great Kings?) (1977), *Vellalar Yaar* (Who Are/Were the Vellalas?) (1981), *Pallar Alla Mallar Aam Mannar* (Not

Pallars, but Mallars and, yes, Kings) (1991) – could be cited as the foundational texts of *Mallariyam*. Asirvatham used the landscape to delineate the agrarian civility of the Pallars in *Marutham* from the rivals who inhabited the forest (Pandian, 2009: 34).

Through Asirvatham's works, *Mallariyam* gained attention as a concept among the upwardly mobile Pallars, many of whom used reservation benefits to get into government jobs and were keen to get rid of the stigmatised identity of the Pallars and they thus became the major patrons of social organisations upholding *Mallariyam*. Various instances of discrimination led the middle class Pallars to form forums to retrieve or reconstruct their social pride as cultivators. One of Deva Asirvatham's followers, Senthil Mallar who runs a movement called *Mallar Meetpu Kalam* (Field for the Retrieval of Mallars) wrote a book *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* (Resurgence of the Pandiyas) in which he wrote demeaningly about various castes and was banned by the state government. However prominent writers and activists did not buy that. R. Christodas Gandhi, former Additional Chief Secretary and a Dalit activist stated that the sedition case was an effort to choke the voice of SC assertion by the Dravidian state, who disapproved of the former defining their identity independently (Karthikeyan, 2013d). The book claimed that if the Pallars start telling their histories to reclaim their golden past and there is no need to engage in anti-caste politics as caste is important to reclaim their histories and to prevent the intermingling of castes. Thus *Mallariyam* as a concept is based on retaining caste purity through the practice of endogamy and could be defined as against the very premise of Ambedkar's idea of annihilation of caste and Dalitness. Though *Mallariyam* as a concept has not gained much ground among the Pallars, it certainly has had a role in influencing their politics in the southern districts. Except for a few Hindutva backed fringe groups and Tamil nationalist groups, it was not welcomed much among the masses. In the following section, I will provide an example of fissures with an ethnographic understanding.

Guru Pujas: The Making and Unmaking of Dalit Politics

As I started having conversations with my informants, I discovered other ways in which caste identity and politics permeated one another. I began to see and understand the

subject of my study, the GPs and in particular Immanuel GP, as a microcosm of the fissures and tensions within Dalit identity. The events reflected and played upon the fissures, mitigated as well as intensified them. In the following pages I will showcase how an event that exemplified Dalit consciousness, unity and gathering to quell caste oppression in the late 1990s and early 2000s slowly started to be shaped as an exclusive gathering emphasising the Pallar imaginary to reinvent and recreate their DKV identity.

Caste-based restrictions affect the mobility of Dalits who are denied access to certain public spaces; the social control over their mobility rests with the dominant castes. The complexities of social relationships within the caste context in the rural setting are highlighted in numerous village studies (see Beteille, 1969; Moffatt, 1979). Though there are clearly demarcated spaces that operate within the rural/village setting, the importance of space in terms of understanding social meanings within an urban context becomes pertinent. One of the most prominent themes in the study of urban spaces in South Asia is the role of public spaces in local politics, in which ‘the neighbourhood as a site of everyday class, gender and caste relations takes a central place’ (De Neve & Donner, 2006: 12). Contestations and social negotiations between unequal groups make public space; the process is ingrained with the competing ideas of retaining dominance and contesting and claiming rights (see Mitchell, 1996; Gorringer, 2006a). We saw how Thevar GP, as a government sponsored and recognised event, becomes a legitimate space for the Thevars to display their domination and appropriation of public space.

Immanuel’s GP, by contrast, unrecognised by the state made the Dalits use the public space here as a ‘representational’ space to defy norms. They take over the roads and public thoroughfares to temporarily install their huge flexbanners and various forms of imagery depicting their caste pride and their claims to royal ancestry. It is important to map the possibilities of the dynamics of space, connecting them with questions of identity to not only unveil the construction of identities but also the possibilities of reproducing social differences through a metastasis of class, caste and spatial positions. In other words, ‘if the policies of space allow for the disconnecting of locality and community, it could allow as much for the reconnecting of identities and localities under

particular circumstances,’ (De Neve, 2006: 21). The GP in the latter context, as we have seen, functions as an important space to reconnect identities or relationships. It becomes a vital space for participants to convergence on the basis of a common denominator - caste in this particular context. Therefore, the mobilisation of Dalits on Immanuel GP offers a challenge to the local forms of dominance and contests the meanings and symbols attached to traditional forms of power exercised by Thevars. It also provides a platform for a performance that could work towards the production of a unified Dalit identity.

The GP became an event to showcase Dalit strength to the state in terms of numbers. Prominent leaders of the major three Dalit castes participated in the event in good numbers. Krishnasamy of the Pallar dominated PT, Thirumavalavan of the Paraiyar dominated VCK, Adhiyaman of the Arunthathiyar dominated Adhi Tamizhar Peravai and Nagai Thiruvalluvan of Tamil Puligal⁶⁷ attend the event each year and pay homage at the memorial. The event draws huge crowds and cuts across different castes within the Dalits, showcasing Dalit power and solidarity. The participation of these leaders and their vociferous and animated open pledges in the memorial – *Thiagi Immanuel Sekaranar Vazhiyil Saathi Olippu Poarattathai Muneduppom* (to continue the fight to annihilate caste following the footsteps of Martyr Immanuel) – brought in a much anticipated and needed sense of solidarity among the Dalits. The event has developed from a low-key affair into a very visible event. There was also a sense of camaraderie in terms of the cadres joining together and participating in the event. The erection of visual signifiers and arranging the event saw the working in tandem of both Pallars and Paraiyars in their respective political organisations.

⁶⁷ Tamil Puligal is an Arunthathiyar dominated Tamil nationalist quasi-militant Ambedkarite movement, influenced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.



Figure 62. VCK president Thol. Thirumavalavan paying homage at the Immanuel Sekaran memorial (l) and a banner welcoming him to the Guru Puja at Paramakudi.

As the event started to grow, the sense of solidarity and camaraderie descended into a shambles. P. Chandrabose stated that, ‘the moment the event became bigger, drawing widespread attention both of the state and the media, the event which was originally named as *Saathi Ozhippu Maaveerar Naal* (Anti-Caste Hero’s Day) became GP.’ Chandrabose alleged that the transition of an anti-caste hero to a cult figure is an after-effect of the imitation or replication process, ‘Immanuel anniversary became a full-fledged imitation of Muthuramalinga Thevar GP.’ Thus the Immanuel GP was not only imagined and executed on the lines of Thevar GP but its whole economy, as an event was oriented around being a counter-event to Thevar GP. Immanuel being a Christian and a person who is believed to have inculcated the principles of Ambedkar had suddenly been made into an icon representing a particular caste (Interview with Chandrabose, Paramakudi, September 2014). The event, despite its significance as a marker of Dalit assertion and its occupation of public space, is now caught in a quandary as the Pallars desire it to be exclusive to them as they attempt to re-ascribe their identity as DKVs.

A key part of this is the Pallars’ imitation of the Thevars in their assertion of violent masculinity as a defining feature of their caste identity; this is performed in stylised actions at the Immanuel GP. As Pandian (2009) demonstrates, a type of rogue, aggressive hyper-masculinity has long been envisioned as inextricably linked to the inherent character of certain sections of the Thevar community. Deliège (1992: 60)

defines that ‘the concept of replication is an interesting one, and one should notice that the very idea of replication implies some exteriority. To replicate is to reproduce someone else’s institution or to move some practices from one context to another.’ Aimed towards debunking Moffat’s study of the untouchables, which claims that the untouchables replicate the social hierarchy practiced by caste Hindus and they live in consensus with the social order, Deliège suggests that there is certainly separation among the untouchables but it is not in the hierarchical sense of graded inequality with ritual implications. He further argues that the untouchables do not live in consensus with the existing social system and accept their position of lowliness. Drawing upon the works of Mosse and Vincentnathan he argues that the untouchables relate their position in the hierarchy in secular idioms and their lowliness in terms of imposed servitude and marginalisation and not in terms of ritual untouchability (Deliège, 1992: 166). The DKVs’ imitation of the Thevars may then imply that they accept the very system that oppresses them (Moffatt, 1979). However, as Deliège argues, replication does not necessarily indicate consensus on the part of Dalits, but instead can be seen as a mode of resistance (1992).

In terms of identifying the process of replication as a form of resistance and dissent, the work of Karanth (2004) is pertinent to our understanding. Challenging both Dumont (1980) and Moffat (1979), his work showcases how replication can also be perceived as an effort to establish an independent cultural identity and as an expression of dissent against the hegemony of the dominant social order. Karanth (2014: 156) argues that, ‘The discourse on “replication and consensus” originating in the work of Dumont and Moffatt conceals efforts on the part of the former Untouchable castes to forge an identity of their own in contradiction to the dominant social order.’ Through his analysis of the Scheduled Castes of Rajapura, he points to a different interpretation of the cultural similarities between the ex-Untouchable castes and castes that are not subjected to the same humiliation and subordination. Drawing upon an example of competing claims for relative status through ritual performances and of a religious practice which despite having ‘features of replication also has aspects of dissent’ (Ibid, 156), his work claims to have ‘extended the discourse from ‘replication and consensus’ to ‘hegemony and

dissent’. This shift provides an opportunity to recognise the agency of the ex-Untouchable castes who are not ‘merely passive participants in a dominant social order that ascribes them a low, and subordinate status.’

Whilst agreeing with the broad contours of Karanth’s argument, caste politics in contemporary Tamil Nadu suggests that the neat binaries between hegemony/dissent and replication/consensus are misplaced. People resist domination from “*inside* the field of power” (Haynes & Prakash 1991: 11, original emphasis). Pallar replication of Thevar performances, thus, simultaneously question Thevar dominance whilst asserting their superiority of Pallars over other members of the Scheduled Castes. My argument here is that despite originating as an anti-caste icon, Immanuel has been rediscovered as a *caste* icon of the upwardly mobile Pallars thanks to the emerging importance and visibility of his GP. As such, Pallar mobilisation may uphold the hegemony of caste relations.



Figure 63: Official invitations printed for Immanuel Sekaran’s GP for the years 2009 (left) and 2010 (right).

The transition to caste hero can be seen in various changes over the years. Firstly, at a symbolic level, the most popular image of Immanuel as an anti-caste martyr portrayed him in military garb with polished boots. This image carried a lot of symbolic power; Immanuel returning as a young Havildar had offered his services to the nation and defied caste codes in the locality by wearing boots. However, this image – representative of a modern outlook, which was much needed for the Dalits – was gradually replaced by the image of him wearing a pure white veshti and shirt, indicating

upper-caste masculinity and traditional forms of power. This, I argue, is an extension of the process of replication; the traditional symbolic masculine power attached to the image of Muthuramalinga Thevar has been imitated by the Pallars. This could be taken as a sign of dissent, a display of ‘what you can do, we can also do’, but it actively waters down the radicalism that was attached to the symbolic meaning of the earlier image. The latter is akin to Ambedkar’s three-piece suit, it is a sartorial symbol⁶⁸ that defies dominance and violates established social norms.

The second aspect of Immanuel’s transition is how an event originally meant as a celebration of a fallen martyr for annihilation of caste, involving the paying of *Veera Vanakkam* (brave salutations), has become a ritualistic event marked by efforts to deify him. Nothing exemplifies the transition better than the images above (see figure 63). Until 2009 the official invitation printed by the organisers of Immanuel’s death anniversary used just his name, ‘Thiagi Immanuel Sekaran’s 52nd Brave Salutations Day’ and printed the invitations with a larger image of Immanuel on the centre along with smaller images of Ambedkar and Veeran Sundaralingam. The invitation also carries details of the day’s events and under two separate lists, names of brotherhood associations who were part of the coordination committee including all the Pallar organisations, SC/ST Forums, Kuravar associations, Arunthathiyar forums and Paraiyar organisations and a second list with political parties were printed. All the above said provide us with an idea that the event was an occasion for the oppressed to congregate and express their dissent towards casteism and caste discrimination. However, from 2010 onwards, the official invitation carried his name along with his caste, Immanuel Sekaran became Immanuel Devendrar though he was ironically still called ‘Saathi Ozhippu Poarali’ (Caste Annihilation Rebel). The prefix addresses him as a hero of caste annihilation ideology and the recently attached suffix uses his caste name.

⁶⁸ Sartorial symbolism forms an important theme in Rajnikanth’s 2016 movie *Kabali*. Clothing in the Indian context is a marker of status and power. As a form of symbolic communication, lower castes were regulated in the public sphere and never had any autonomy over their clothing. What they should wear and how they should wear it was decided by the dominant castes. *Kabali* as an underclass hero who is conscious of the power of dressing, and who knows the politics behind Gandhi shedding his clothes and Ambedkar donning a three-piece suit asserts that dressing in suits is a mark of dissent, a recognised code of self-formation through clothing, is deployed to upset the denotation of power, status and social location. For more see Gorringer and Rafanell (2007); Damodaran (2016).

As discussed in Chapter 5, Thevar GP and the cultural forum of Pallars influenced this transition. All the rituals of Immanuel's GP, such as head tonsuring, are imitations of those at Thevar GP. The third aspect of the transition occurred in the literary space. Immanuel Sekaran has been deliberately made into Immanuel Devendrar, and a conscious effort was made to rewrite his history. In all the reissues of publications referring to him, his name has been changed from Immanuel Sekaran to Immanuel Devendrar. This has been popularised now and the change appears on billboards, posters and wall paintings. This clearly is an indication that Immanuel Sekaran is not a Dalit icon, but a Devendra icon. There is an inherent message that Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars cannot stake a claim to him. Collectively, these changes, which reduce him to a caste hero or symbol of caste pride, are divisive tools.

According to *Makkal Viduthalai Katchi* (People's Liberation Party) leader Murugavel Rajan the cultural establishments of the Pallars wanted to pose an aggressive challenge to the Thevar consolidation and went with the idea of prioritising caste rather than its annihilation. (Interview, Madurai, August 2015). Speaking about this transition Stalin Rajangam said, 'it has to be understood purely from the local power relations and questions of power, the existing socio-political conditions warrant such a transition so it happened.' But the danger of reducing him as a caste icon is an unjust reversal he said (Personal Communication, September, 2015). During the last two years Pallar-based organisations and political parties have intensified their demands to label seven Scheduled Caste sub-castes spread across southern Tamil Nadu – the Pallar, Kudumbar, Pannadi, Kaalaadi, Kadayar, Devendrakulatar, and Vadhiriyaar castes – 'Devendra kula Vellalars'. Ironically, a section of the Pallar community have joined with the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is now spearheading this demand as they see this as a great opportunity to make inroads into Tamil Nadu, a state where they have not gained traction. There is also another demand to remove Pallars from the Scheduled Caste list and place them under the Most Backward Classes. Both these demands have received a mixed reception among the community members.

Conclusion

In both the cases discussed above, the question of fissures and attempts to re-invent or carve separate identities from a collective is emerging as prominent issue. In the case of Thevar identity as a collective, it is publically perceived as the most powerful cluster politically, however, as we have seen in the Agamudaiyar resistance, there is disgruntlement among them regarding representation and access to resources. In the case of the Pallars, a Janus-faced existence defines the contemporary nature of Pallar leaders. They are caught in a precarious situation. The most vociferous among them who claim the sanskritised nomenclature of Devendra Kula Vellalars, or the more recent Mallars, oppose the usage of the Dalit terminology in the local context. However, they somehow do not feel uncomfortable rubbing shoulders with Dalit leaders from Maharashtra and Delhi at a national level; John Pandian and Krishnasamy have no qualms coming together under the National Dalit Federation banner and participate in events organised by Ram Vilas Paswan or Ramdas Athavale.



Figure 64. John Pandian (extreme left) and Krishnasamy (second from right) during the National Dalit Conference held in Delhi. Also seen in the picture are Ramdas Athavale (Middle), Ramnath Kovind (second from left) and Udit Raj (extreme right). Photo: Siva.

It is important to understand, nevertheless, that the fissures or impulse to reinvent is not the same in both cases. The intention to disassociate from the clustered identity of Dalits is more acute in the case of some Pallars than the intention of Agamudaiyars to separate

from being identified as Mukkulathors. In the former instance, the idea is to get rid of what they believe is a stigmatised identity and gain upward mobility. It was arguably influenced by the example of Nadar advancement (see Hardgrave, 1969; Good, 1981). As the Dalit identity has Pan-Indian effects and consequences, the leaders are also aware of the Constitution guaranteed protection and have a real dilemma. For example, when asked about their double-faced existence, the cadres of Puthiya Tamilagam claimed that their leader Krishnasamy had no issues using the term Dalit, but complained that it had been appropriated by the Paraiyars and their intellectual tradition had not only appropriated Dalitness but also government jobs and they almost have a monopoly over reservation. 'We are not accusing them but they had a long history of that tradition in the erstwhile Madras Presidency and we are now slowly catching up,' said Shankar, PT's Tiruchi District Secretary. Shankar further stated that, PT needs to accommodate Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars and that is the only way to create solidarity and for that PT needs to shed its green and red colours (Interview with Shankar, Mammallapuram, November 2014). This idea of creating solidarity between oppressed castes and launching a united fight for rights is shared by many of the cadres, but is potentially undermined by caste specific mobilisation.

The mobilisation of the Agamudaiyars and the effort to carve a separate identity, though marked by the threat of losing their status as a caste within a clustered identity, is actually an attempt to gain more political power and representation. For the Maravars too it is about gaining more governmental benefits while enhancing their status as a martial caste with a glorious past. Muthuramalinga Thevar was deliberately avoided by the Agamudaiyars to demonstrate their disavowal of Mukkulathor identity. Senthil Mallar of Mallar Meetpu Kalam is propagating among Pallars that his fight is to get MBC status for Pallars. This desire to be categorised as an MBC rather than BC is driven by the desire to be part of a caste category which includes Tamil Nadu's recognised martial caste groups, the Maravars, sections of Kallars, and Vanniyars. It can also be read as an example of imitation and competing masculinities.

Taken together, both examples of fragmentation and identity-based assertion speak to contemporary caste relations and dynamics in Tamil Nadu. Contrary to arguments that

caste would wither away post-Independence, it remains a central aspect of identity-formation, resource distribution and meaning-making in contemporary Tamil Nadu. The impetus behind the adoption of caste politics varies; the Thevars in this study seek to assert their dominance and standing. Even when seeking to carve out more space for themselves, Agamudaiyars and Maravars perceive themselves as natural rulers whose dominance is threatened. De Neve and Carswell (2011) likewise note how Gounder mobilisation has been prompted by the economic emancipation and political mobilisation of Dalits. Pallar mobilisation in this context can be read as a form of dissent, but it is enmeshed within the social politics of caste and may reinforce the hegemony of caste-based relations especially among the rest of the Dalits. 'Caste', Jodhka and Manor (2017: 3) argue, 'survives in today's India beyond vote banks and quotas. It survives as a resource of social and cultural capital, positive and negative. It also survives as a relationship that signifies power, a system of domination that often breeds violence, and almost always signifies hierarchy and inequality'. In the next and final chapter I will be discussing on how the public performances, narratives, collective memory and symbols employed by the Pallars selectively during GP is used for their self-empowerment and to shift the discourse from recipients of governmental benefits to a privileged caste of political power.

CONCLUSION:

Production of Caste and Ascriptions of a New Identity

Throughout the thesis we have seen how sections of both the Thevar and Pallar middle classes are seeking to assimilate themselves into Hindu tradition through the production of literature associating their past with higher status and symbols of domination. They anticipate that this will enable them to reinforce or construct a cohesive identity and a respectable place in the social hierarchy. (Re)Positioning themselves as members of Royal lineage, and lords of irrigated lands, is aimed at furthering their social and economic interests today. In the last two years the middle class Pallars are actively engaging with pan-Hindu beliefs, symbols and myths that continue to figure on a discursive level. They play a prominent part within the indigenous framework where local actors employ such symbols and myths to assert that their current status was a fall from glorious pasts (cf. Deliège 1997). Both Thevars and Pallars refer to old Tamil literary texts and myths as sources of authority for their claims to respectable social status. These efforts speak to the central concerns of the thesis.

The research has investigated the political imaginary of both Thevars and Pallars, examining the multiple ways in which they link myths, symbols and everyday practices in constructing and enacting their identities. In the case of former these acts are tools of dominance, and in the latter they constitute political struggles to be heard as legitimate members of Tamil society. The thesis also indicates how these processes of identity formation are maintained and produced through encounters with the modern state. The forming of associations and collective mobilisation contribute to forging an 'imagined community', investing it with a sense of solidarity, pride and loyalty. Thevar caste associations start from a position of social power and dominance, but are actively engaged in formulating new articulations of collective memory and historical narratives to contest colonial ethnographies that portray them as Criminal and lowly Tribes. Such efforts have borne fruit and, through literature and other forms of media representation, the Thevar community is inscribed into the spatial, political and symbolic structures of

the Tamil land as such. Pallar groups, by contrast, are still seeking to shed their stigmatised identity as ‘untouchables’ and create historical narratives and contemporary identities that are consonant with their future aspirations. Unsurprisingly, these twin approaches place the two castes on a collision course that shapes caste dynamics in southern Tamil Nadu.

Cultural Contestations

I have used the term ‘martial symbolism’ to refer to the visual practices centered on the idea of depicting a strong lineage of martial tradition. As part of this process different caste groups in the Tamil regions are involved in the creation of new caste icons from the medieval and ancient past to provide that lineage. A practice found largely among the Thevars, this has over a period of time been replicated by many castes. Indeed, an article I wrote as a journalist in 2013, captures this dynamic:

The day after Jayalalithaa announced that a memorial for Karikala Cholan (the Chola King) would be constructed ... many intermediate and scheduled castes associations were printing posters and releasing advertisements in major dailies claiming that Karikala Cholan was their ancestor and thanking the Chief Minister for the proposal to build a memorial. (Karthikeyan 2013)



Figure 65. A Kallar poster in Madurai thanking Chief Minister Jayalalithaa for sanctioning a memorial for Chola King Karikala Cholan.

Royal lineage, in other words, has become a highly contested signifier. Competition over ancestry has intensified not only in public spaces but has also spread to social media. Such contestations are not new. For example, the Nadars constructed an origin myth for their caste and claimed that they were the descendants of Pandya kings. According to Hardgrave (1969) at least 40 books extolling the myth of high status and greatness of Nadars were published in the 75 years after 1857. As Deliege argues, ‘when a caste rises socially, the myths used are more grandiose’ (1997: 135). What is different in my fieldwork, is that Thevars and Pallars are publicly laying claim to similar pasts and playing out their claims through dense visual signifiers and processions.

In the case of Thevars their current position of dominance is partly due to the homogenising and controlling tendencies of the modern colonial state, carried out through various governmental mechanisms to produce disciplined and civil subjects (Cohn 1987; Yang 1985). This, as showcased in the thesis, brought the different castes together to invoke a collective social memory of a cruel past. The social memory of the past as ‘criminalised tribes’ was utilised to develop emotional and ideological ties with particular histories and geographies. The Thevars mobilised around sites of collective remembrance with a series of commemorative events. Annual public rituals on a set of key symbolic dates established what Nora (1989) refers to as ‘lieux de mémoire’ or sites of memory. These sites foster collective identity and become part of what Till terms ‘the dynamic process by which groups map myths (in an anthropological sense) about themselves and their world onto a specific time and place’ (Till, 1999: 254). This process of mapping does not occur in isolation but becomes a central part of building collective identities, which are symbolically coded in such public commemorations and symbols.

Connerton (1989: 51) points out that elites invent rituals that ‘claim continuity with an appropriate historic past, organising ceremonies/parades and mass gatherings, and constructing new ritual spaces.’ We have seen, however, that dominated groups may

create ‘subaltern counter-publics’ in which they contest hegemonic norms and articulate alternate visions and identities. Mohan (1999) argues that ‘discursive notions of equality’ are an integral part of processes by which social groups are redefined. Castes increasingly engage in the invention of tradition and revisit the past to address the present. The process of reconceptualising history and identifying the causes of present conditions in terms of caste identity are paradigmatic (Mohan, 1999:3). Lower castes across India have used myths, oral narratives and discourses identifying or associating their current marginality as an imagined fall from glorious pasts. Such self-perceptions among the lower castes in India and subordinated groups elsewhere is now widespread (O’ Hanlon 1985: 150-151).

At one level, the social dynamics discussed in this thesis, echo arguments about the ethnicisation of caste. Hierarchies are contested and reshaped as lower castes lay claim to superior status and engage in forms of competitive associationalism. Gupta’s (2004) description of caste today as identity over hierarchy, and Dumont’s (1966) argument about the ‘substantialisation of castes’, resonate here. ‘One of the main consequences of four decades of competitive electoral politics on the local caste hierarchy’, as Mitra (1993: 61) observes, ‘has been to render all inherited relations of power necessarily contestable’. The competition over status, royal lineage and access to state power and resources seen in this thesis speak to such research. We need, however, to follow Natrajan (2012) in viewing such arguments with caution. Gupta, he notes, ‘overlooks the social and cultural production of caste identities within relations of power’ (2012: 16). In my research, I have highlighted the processes through which caste identities are constructed and contested in ways that reinforce hierarchical values and exclusions (cf. Harriss 2012). As Natrajan points out, the resource monopolies on which caste systems rest are revealed in:

ongoing debates over “reverse discrimination” in India, wherein upper-caste discourse regularly expresses its outrage through cultural idioms – a sense of entitlement (*our* jobs, *our* seats in colleges), reproduction of contempt and prejudice and outright stereotyping. (2012: 24)

Whilst Pallar performances may be said to assert their equality to those above them,

they simultaneously cast others as lower. The martial symbolism employed in both cases is also performative, in that it acts to shape the political subjectivities of the performers. We have seen how visual signifiers have been accompanied by the adoption of martial arts, political assertion and masculine modes of comportment and interaction. The claim to a royal past, thus, is not simply an attempt to rewrite history, but shapes how caste groups see themselves and others and practise caste on a daily basis. This is particularly apparent with regard to the position of women in both castes. An emphasis on pride and honour has reinforced caste boundaries and increased the moral policing of women's behavior and chastity (cf. Still 2014; Gorringer 2017). We have also seen how competitive associationalism has served to habituate violence in southern Tamil Nadu by etching exclusive identities and colours onto caste spaces and territories. It is only against this backdrop that we can understand the rise in caste-based violence over the past decade.

Strategies of De-stigmatisation

The performative effects of such claims are to the fore in the Pallar case. As part of their efforts to reconceptualise history, small groups among the Pallars are following the 'Nadar Model' and are engaged in various forms of cultural intervention. The Madurai-based voluntary organization the Devendra Charitable Trust, for example, organised a meeting and invited Amit Shah the national BJP leader to endorse their demand to club the seven sub-castes (Pallar, Kudumbar, Pannadi, Kaalaadi, Kadayar, Devendrakulatar, and Vadhiriyar) under the category 'Devendra kula Vellalars.' As Tamil Nadu remains the sole state in India where the BJP has been unable to make inroads, there was a mutual interest in this meeting. Amit Shah, accordingly, participated in the meeting and passed a resolution calling upon the State government to declare the seven SC sub-castes as 'Devendra kula Vellalars'. M Thangaraj, the president of the Trust argued that the community was never discriminated against and had owned lands during the British rule and were engaged in cultivation and there is no reason to call them Dalits. This is an increasingly common trope and speaks to the aspirations of Pallars to alter their status. Shah praised the community members for their demands and for taking pride in their

caste. In his speech, he said,

I know the history of caste groups demanding a status lower down the social order to obtain governmental benefits, but here is a caste that seeks social recognition as a caste of higher status. This consciousness to take pride in one's caste is an important aspect that could be followed by others. I came here in admiration for this fascinating aspect of the community and not for any political reasons. (Field Notes, Madurai, 6 August 2015)

He promised in the meeting that concerted efforts would be taken to ensure that this declaration is brought to the attention of the Prime Minister. The event organisers said that their objective was to inculcate the idea of development among different castes and prevent them from being exploited as mere votebanks.



Figure 66. Posters welcoming Amit Shah for the Madurai DKV conference.

Seeking to cash in on potential alliances, PT's Krishnasamy organised a protest meeting in Madurai against the state government with the same demand for a clustered identity of castes just a day ahead of Amit Shah's visit. He claimed that his party had been raising this demand for more than two decades.



Figure 67. PT organised a protest meeting demanding the categorisation of DKVs.

The visit of Amit Shah and BJP's endorsement, created ripples across the state, especially among the parties that work with the Dalits. VCK's general secretary Ravikumar in an interview pointed out the legal hitches. He noted that the State government has no power to meddle with the SC/ST list as the Supreme Court in 2010 has clearly stated that executive power cannot be used to make any change in the list. He also termed this 'endorsement as nothing but desperation of the BJP which is struggling to get a foothold in Tamil Nadu.' PT's Krishnaswamy, also demanded that the State unit of the BJP should clearly state the reason for supporting this demand (Yamunan, 2015). As highlighted by Gooptu (2001), how Hindutva influenced the Shudras and brought them in as vanguards of Hindu culture by investing in their physical powers the Pallars are being seen as potential vanguards within the Hindu right's imagination which wants to break entry into the Dravidian state. The Madurai declaration conference also foregrounded a moral economy of dignity in which Pallars themselves portray being part of the SC category as a stigma and call for their declassification as SCs even if this means they forego reservation. Abandoning reservation is one of Sangh's major aims, but this delicate move did not go unnoticed. Selvakumar of *Tamil Nadu Devendra Kula Vellalar Uravinmurai Sangam* (Association of Devendra Kula Vellalar Community Council) condemned this idea and stated to reap electoral

benefits; the BJP and its ideological parent Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are making the Pallar community a scapegoat. 'The reality is that a lot of the Pallars are still living in poverty and to remove them from SC list is going to make things worse. This demand is from people who are economically forward within the community and had migrated to urban areas and do not know the existing reality' (Yamunan, 2015).

The conference sparked debates on reservational benefits versus dignity. I talked to a few members from the caste on this demand,

Karikalan, an educationist said 'We have a rich culture and many of our youth are multitalented but still we are looked down upon as people with no merit because we belong to SCs, so to get rid of this stigma we are even ready to lose the reservation status.' Speaking along similar lines, M. Ramasamy a social activist from Madurai said: 'In India not only SCs, but BCs and MBCs and other listed classes are also availing reservation benefits but the existing discourse on reservations attaches stigma only to the SCs as people who get benefits through quota while treating the others with dignity and this is the situation here in what is propagated as the land of social justice. The shame and humiliation that we undergo because of these reservations is more than the benefits we avail through it. If we can work hard for another 20 years we will be able to prosper even without reservation benefits.' Rajalingam who runs an institute for competitive exams in Tirunelveli over the phone said, 'Actually if you observe carefully it is the castes clubbed under the MBC category which avail more reservation benefits than castes under SC category but the stigma is only for the latter.' Senthil Mallar of Mallar Meetpu Kazhagam said: 'Not now, since 1997 we have been demanding and protesting to remove us from the SC list and to accommodate us under a separate list with 10 per cent reservation. Being listed as a SC is not allowing us to prosper. Our economic mobility has become stagnant, we are not able to run business, practice politics, even after getting converted to Islam or Christianity we are discriminated against. Murugavel Rajan, founder of Makkal Viduthalai Katchi said, 'Though it is a welcome demand to categorise all the subcastes under the common name of DKV but the rhetoric that there is no need for reservation cannot be accepted and it is not practical and to proper higher education reservation is invaluable.' (Interviews, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Sattur, August 2015)

The reception among the Pallars to this idea of leaving the Scheduled Caste list and abandoning reservations is clearly mixed. Most of my rural interlocutors maintained that the change in nomenclature from Pallar to DKV is welcome, but the existing socio-economic realities do not allow us to move out of the SC list. To cite an example, in September 2015 I went to Mandalamanikkam's Pallapacheri village (where Palani Kumar the school boy was murdered in 2011 alleging that he wrote a comment

denigrating Muthuramalinga Thevar). The youth there stated that there was widespread discrimination in the village.

We can't do anything about it because we are a minority and whatever they say becomes unwritten law, even during the Immanuel GP they didn't allow us to play songs, but for Thevar GP they played songs stating that it was a government event. The 18 patti village Maravars are so powerful, even the CM listens to them. Our village is like an island how it is surrounded by water, we are surrounded by the Thevars. Go and enquire at the Mandalamanickam Government higher secondary school there is no student from the Pallapacheri village from Class VI to XII, the villagers take their sons and daughters to nearby schools and for college they go to Aruppukkottai or Paramakudi. (Field Notes, Pallapacheri, September 2015)

Though the youth in the village supported the demand to have DKV as a general consolidated category, they are aware that loss of reservations would jeopardize their possible future in terms of gaining proper education and one of them even mentioned that it is only very recently that many of them are getting educated and are moving away from agriculture related labour. On the one hand the Pallar leaders are trying to construct a glorious past associated with agriculture but contemporary economic conditions compelled Pallar youth to move away from agriculture, which is no more lucrative for landowners, and linked to dependency for a majority of them who are landless agricultural labourers.

Identity Change and Assertion in Context

In response to Krishnasamy supporting the idea of a clustered identity under the category 'Devendra kula Vellalars', Tamil writer Stalin Rajangam reflected on the issues involved.

If a caste community wants to get out of SC list, I will support it. Whether it is possible and under what circumstances, we have to debate that. And also it shouldn't be the job of just the SCs alone to annihilate caste, while others use caste connections and shore up the interests of their community. Caste is not just an economic or political issue; it is also a psychological one. Having decided that the inferiority mindset needs to change, the community wants to rename itself and is willing to come out of SC list. Why must they alone be blamed? The demand has been there for 30 years now. But, without a doubt, it is an attempt to position themselves as one of the dominant castes (Naig, 2017).

The efforts of Pallars to reclassify or to carve a new identity speak to wider processes and do not occur in isolation. Thus, this new mode of self-making undertaken by a section of Pallars harping back to glorious pasts need not necessarily provide them with a sense of emancipation as external mediation both in terms of state and acceptance among other castes remain important.



Figure 68. Invitation flyer for Social Rights-Pride Retrieval Conference organized by Mallar Meetpu Kalam in Virudhunagar.

The effort of sections of Pallars to de-stigmatise their caste identity through various means needs to gain social acceptance and wider recognition not only from the state but also from other castes. In 2013, for example, the Devendra Voluntary Trust organized the *Indira Vizha* (Festival of Lord Indira) conference at the Nadar Mahajana Association's Vellaisami Nadar College in Madurai. This attempt to embrace both the

‘existence of caste and co-existence of castes’ sought to emphasise Hindutva’s potential to unite these castes and bring a united Hindu identity by holding a conference of the Pallar community in a Nadar college. However as against their expectations, the members of various Nadar associations resisted that move and expressed their condemnation through posters (see image below) and warned that this move would create caste disturbances in the region. The college is located in a predominantly Thevar neighbourhood and there is already a history of antagonism among the three castes who are numerically large in the southern districts so the police, which had earlier given permission, cancelled it after sensing trouble and protests from Nadar associations.



Figure 69: Nadar association posters condemning the Pallar conference at Vellaichamy Nadar College in Madurai.

What this example demonstrates is the continued interplay between identity, power and state authority in the construction and performance of caste. It problematizes the ‘neo-Hindutva vision that narrates caste as benign difference’ (Natrajan 2012: 28), and highlights the continued salience of casteism. Merely claiming and performing higher status, it reminds us, is not enough to alter enduring structures of inequality in terms of resources, access to state power, and control over public space. This thesis has demonstrated the continued salience of caste, and illustrated how it may be deployed both to assert and challenge the dominance of social groups. The research doubtless has, to some extent, been shaped by my position and status. Further work on the gendered dimensions of these processes and the inner-lives of dominant castes is called for. Nevertheless, the data presented here speaks to contemporary caste dynamics and performances and, I hope, enhances our understanding of how it continues to shape

identities, collective action and behavior today. Caste, it is clear, remains a central means through which public space, social status and resource distribution are organised.

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